



# Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



FRIDAY — 10 DEC 2021

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## Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Homeless camp behind school cleared</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/homeless-encampment-behind-broadview-thomson-cleared-outreach-volunteer-under-fire">https://komonews.com/news/local/homeless-encampment-behind-broadview-thomson-cleared-outreach-volunteer-under-fire</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Crews worked Thursday to remove the remaining tents at a once-sprawling homeless encampment behind Broadview Thomson K-8.</p> <p>For more than a year, KOMO News has been reporting on the situation near the school and Bitter Lake that has aggravated and upset parents and neighbors, demanding either the school district, which owns the property, or the city take action.</p> <p>The area is now fenced off to keep people from setting up tents. It expected to reopen sometime mid-January.</p> <p>Joshua Johnston was living at the encampment for around six months. He says he doesn't have a place to go because he's not a fan of shelters but he plans to live in his car until he can figure out something else.</p> <p>Last week, 15 people living at the encampment transitioned to the nearby "Friendship Heights" tiny house village run by the Low Income Housing Institute off of Aurora Avenue.</p> <p>Since mid-September, the Human Services Department confirms that 34 referrals have been made to shelters or other housing options.</p> <p>The volunteer-led group "Anything Helps" also played a role in moving some at the encampment to the new tiny house village.</p> <p>Former director Mike Mathias is accused of asking women at the camp to inject him with meth and threatening to take away their housing vouchers if they didn't. He's also accused of using funding to buy drugs for himself and others.</p> <p>Seattle Public Schools contracted the volunteer group to help with outreach, giving them \$5,000 for efforts in moving people to the new tiny house village.</p> <p>Mathias told KOMO News he denies the accusations.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Seattle area faces winds, downpours</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/weather/seattle-area-to-see-strong-winds-drenching-rain-loads-of-snow-expected-in-mountains/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/weather/seattle-area-to-see-strong-winds-drenching-rain-loads-of-snow-expected-in-mountains/</a>
GIST	<p>After a short break from the rain, a bigger and more unsettled weather system is headed for the Seattle area. Starting Friday night, strong winds and drenching rain are expected in the lowlands.</p> <p>The National Weather Service of Seattle said that in the mountains, snow is expected in feet, not inches, so plan accordingly.</p> <p>Chains are required for traveling over the passes, except for four- or all-wheel drive vehicles, according to the Washington State Department of Transportation.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Rock-n-Roll run series moves to Bellevue</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/eastside/rock-n-roll-running-series-moves-to-bellevue-in-2022/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/eastside/rock-n-roll-running-series-moves-to-bellevue-in-2022/</a>

Seattle's annual St. Jude Rock 'n' Roll Marathon has run its course. Next year, the races will be neither a marathon, nor in Seattle.

The newly named St. Jude Rock 'n' Roll Running Series Washington, a half-marathon and 5K, will be held in Bellevue on Labor Day weekend. The races, which typically bring in about 18,000 registered participants, will be the first in three years; the last was held in June 2019. Race organizers announced the change this week.

Nothing pushed the event away from Seattle, but in talks with various city departments, no one could confirm that the city would be able to host the event, according to Tim Brosious, regional director of the IRONMAN Group, which owns the Rock 'n' Roll Running Series.

"We are working on some of these large-scale events 400 days out, so we were pretty behind on our planning already, and we wanted to be able to host in the Puget Sound region," he said.

Ali Daniels, Visit Seattle's senior vice president and chief marketing officer, said in a statement that routes would have been limited as the city continues its recovery from the pandemic and "we would not be doing the race, the runners and the destinations any justice."

"They are great partners that we have worked with for a very long time," she said. "... We look forward to the race returning soon as we are in constant contact."

The 2020 Rock 'n' Roll Marathon, headlined by rap star Sir Mix-a-Lot, was delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2021 course was initially scheduled for June, then postponed to August.

That race, however, was canceled in July. The Rock 'n' Roll Running Series cited local law enforcement constraints, "and the strain any additional events could have in negatively affecting the community."

Registration opens Dec. 15. Anyone registered for the 2021 event is automatically registered for the Bellevue races, according to the organization.

The route hasn't been decided for the races, which feature live music at several different points along the way, but the start will be at Bellevue Downtown Park. Routes for the Seattle races have varied throughout the years. At the inaugural Rock 'n' Roll marathon and half-marathon in 2009, participants started in Tukwila, ran along Lake Washington Boulevard and ended at Qwest — now Lumen — Field. In 2015, the marathon route went down Rainier Avenue South, around Seward Park, over the I-90 bridge to Mercer Island and returned to Seattle Center. At the last race in 2019, runners went downtown, then through Eastlake, Fremont, Queen Anne and Green Lake.

After the 2019 race, organizers decided to discontinue the marathon course because of dwindling interest, Brosious said.

Bellevue officials said they are excited for the event to come to the Eastside city. Rock 'n' Roll Running Series organizers and Bellevue's destination management organization reached out to the city of Bellevue in June, according to spokesperson Brad Harwood. He cited the city's annual large-crowd events, such as Snowflake Lane during the holidays and its Fourth of July celebration.

News of the location and date change brought mixed reviews among runners. Brosious acknowledged they were working through the shift, but didn't think it would be a deterrent.

"Obviously, we aren't going to have the classic and iconic locations that Seattle is able to provide, but you know what, Bellevue has shown us and everybody in the Pacific Northwest that it does have exactly what our runners are looking for, and the Pacific Northwest experience."

	<p>Jessica Anthony, 40, of Redmond, who has consistently run or volunteered at each race since she moved to the area in 2013, said was happy to know that it will be easier for her to get to the race. She noted one change in Bellevue that will likely make runners happy:</p> <p>“Fewer hills,” she said. “Very thankful for that.”</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/09 Seattle mayor: \$95M for affordable housing</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/city-of-seattle-announces-95-million-for-affordable-housing">https://komonews.com/news/local/city-of-seattle-announces-95-million-for-affordable-housing</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>SEATTLE - On Thursday, Mayor Jenny Durkan and the Office of Housing announced a new investment of \$95 million for over 1,100 affordable housing units.</p> <p>The money will support a number of projects to help people experiencing homelessness in Seattle and will go towards the construction of 692 new affordable rental homes, the rehabilitation of 364 existing rental homes and the acquisition of a newly-constructed building that will provide 63 new affordable rental homes.</p> <p>That's in addition to the more than \$47 million invested earlier this year.</p> <p>"Today shows what we can do as a community if we come together to really tackle some of the most critical issues we have, and top of the list is affordable housing," Durkan said during a press conference Thursday.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/09 Calif. cases rising; signs winter surge</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-12-09/california-coronavirus-cases-rising-in-signs-of-winter-surge">https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-12-09/california-coronavirus-cases-rising-in-signs-of-winter-surge</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>Health officials from a number of California counties say they're seeing early signs of a rebound in coronavirus cases related to Thanksgiving, an upturn some worry could be the beginning of the state's fifth COVID-19 surge.</p> <p>It's still far from clear whether California will see a significant spike in cases this winter or if the combination of relatively high vaccination rates and various safety rules limit the scope of a surge.</p> <p>But there are already warning signs.</p> <p>Statewide, the daily average of newly reported infections has risen more than 30% since before Thanksgiving. The number of Californians hospitalized with COVID-19 also has climbed during that time, interrupting weeks of mostly steady declines.</p> <p>And though the emergence of the heavily mutated Omicron variant of the coronavirus has dominated recent pandemic discourse, officials say they're still contending with the highly infectious Delta variant, which continues to account for virtually all new cases statewide.</p> <p>Officials and experts have often said it takes weeks for the scope of a particular activity's effect on coronavirus transmission to become clear.</p> <p>In Los Angeles County, weekly coronavirus case rates have climbed by 33% over the last two weeks, sending the nation's most populous county back into the worst coronavirus transmission tier, colored red on maps published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Also rising are COVID-19 hospitalizations, which just before Thanksgiving hit a new low since the Delta surge began in the summer. COVID-19 hospitalizations are now up 21% since Nov. 22.</p>

“Already, based on the trends, we are looking at the possible beginnings of a winter surge,” L.A. County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer said Thursday.

Santa Clara County, Northern California’s most populous, is reporting its highest weekly coronavirus case rate since mid-September, according to a Times analysis of state data.

“So we’re going to be keeping a close eye on this, but we may be entering our fifth wave, swell, surge. We’re waiting to see what that might be,” Dr. Sara Cody, the local health officer and public health director, told the county Board of Supervisors.

And health officials in San Diego, Ventura, Alameda and Marin counties made similar observations this week.

“We began to see some increase in numbers of reported cases in the last week,” said Dr. Wilma Wooten, San Diego County’s health officer. “Cases may continue to increase, and there could be a potential increase around the holidays and winter months.”

San Diego County recently reported its highest weekly case rate since the end of October, according to the Times analysis.

In Ventura County, coronavirus cases have increased in the last few days.

“Our numbers over the weekend and yesterday, they started to go up,” Rigoberto Vargas, Ventura County’s director of public health, said Tuesday.

Based on the dates the tests were done and when symptoms were first reported, Vargas said he suspects there was a boost in transmission over the Thanksgiving weekend. Weekly cases have doubled in the last two weeks.

But San Francisco Health Director Dr. Grant Colfax wasn’t as sure a surge was occurring in his city.

“This is still probably too early to detect any significant surge after the Thanksgiving holiday,” he told health commissioners, “but we’re watching this very carefully.”

Overall, for the week that ended Nov. 23, California reported an average of 5,000 new coronavirus cases a day. For the week that ended Tuesday, that number climbed to about 6,600 a day.

The number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 on Wednesday — 3,401 — was about 9% higher than the figure recorded two weeks ago.

Yet it remains to be seen whether this two-week snapshot will morph into a more persistent trend. It is also unclear what effect a fifth coronavirus surge would have across California.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, which boasts the state’s highest vaccination rates, some health officials suspect that even if reported cases rise, hospitalizations might not increase as significantly because so many people have been vaccinated.

According to data compiled by The Times, 81% of Marin County’s residents of all ages are fully vaccinated, and 89% have received at least one dose.

Though the emergence of Delta has somewhat eroded the vaccines’ ability to blunt the spread of the coronavirus, health officials note the shots remain highly effective at staving off severe illness. As a result, the devastating domino effect of previous surges — with increases in cases triggering corresponding rises in hospitalizations and, eventually, in deaths — might not land in areas with robust vaccination coverage.

That's been the experience in Marin County. Since vaccinations became widely available in the first half of the year, COVID-19 hospitalizations no longer are rising in the same corresponding way, said county health officer Dr. Matt Willis.

"The relationship between cases and severe illness has, fortunately, been uncoupled because of high vaccination rates," Willis said.

L.A. County has lower vaccination rates than the Bay Area, but they are still decent — 66% are fully vaccinated, and 74% have had at least one dose. As a result, L.A. County has already seen a lower percentage of infected people needing hospitalization; during the summer Delta surge, between 5% and 6% of coronavirus cases needed hospitalization, whereas last year, 15% to 20% of cases needed hospital care, Ferrer said.

"That is very good news and really reflects the power of those vaccines," Ferrer said. "I don't anticipate us being hit anywhere near as hard as we were hit last winter."

Still, all increases in coronavirus cases are worrisome, which makes it more likely that other people will need hospitalization and more people will die, Ferrer said.

In Fresno County, where only 56% of residents are fully vaccinated and 63% have received at least one shot, health officials are bracing for the possibility of a severe winter wave.

While other parts of the state saw a reprieve after the peak of the summertime Delta wave, hospitals across the San Joaquin Valley have been overwhelmed for months — and the region remains a particular point of concern for state officials heading into the winter.

"Now we have a lot more non-COVID patients in the hospital, and how much more can we absorb as far as COVID patients?" California state epidemiologist Dr. Erica Pan said in a talk hosted by the California Medical Assn.

California still remains in a better position than most states. Though it does have a high level of coronavirus transmission — the worst category in the CDC's four-tier scale — the state has the ninth-lowest weekly coronavirus case rate among all states.

But conditions in other parts of the country have deteriorated, and it's unlikely California will be immune from those national swings.

New York, for instance, has a weekly coronavirus case rate roughly triple California's, and Gov. Kathy Hochul recently declared a disaster emergency.

"COVID hospitalizations are trending upward. The number of beds is going downward, and that's a real problem," Hochul said after Thanksgiving.

Nationwide, the rolling weekly average of newly reported coronavirus cases has climbed from roughly 94,500 a day just before Thanksgiving to more than 118,500 as of Wednesday, CDC data show.

And that's before adding in any widespread impacts from the Omicron variant.

San Francisco reported the nation's first confirmed Omicron case Dec. 1. Twelve other cases have since been documented statewide — six in Alameda County, five in Los Angeles County and one in San Diego County. Scientists also have collected specimens suggesting Omicron was found in wastewater in Sacramento and Merced counties.

Health officials caution that much remains unknown about Omicron and how it may shift the trajectory of the pandemic. But scientists around the globe are working urgently to get those answers.

“We have molecular evidence to suggest that the mutations that are seen in Omicron and in other variants would suggest that they are associated with increased infectivity,” said Dr. Anthony Fauci, President Biden’s chief medical advisor for the pandemic. “Real-world evidence is accumulating rapidly — literally on a daily basis — to allow us to determine increase in cases, possible increase in reproductive number and the rapid replacement of Delta by Omicron in certain situations.”

In one promising development, there are some preliminary indications Omicron might not make its hosts as sick as other coronavirus strains. But Fauci stressed that further study is needed.

“Given severity, hospitalization and death are always lagging indicators, I would imagine it will take at least another couple of weeks before we have a good handle and then a really good handle a few weeks thereafter,” he said during a briefing this week. “So I would say we shouldn’t be making any definitive conclusions, certainly not before the next couple of weeks.”

Officials say the best way to protect against Omicron is to employ the measures that have proved effective against other variants: regular handwashing; wearing masks in crowded settings, particularly while indoors; and, most important, getting vaccinated or boosted when eligible.

“We find ourselves in a far better position now than we were last year,” CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said. “We have gained knowledge and experience from addressing other variants such as Delta, and we have far more science, tools and treatment options available.”

One spot of optimism has been an uptick in the demand for booster shots among fully vaccinated people — not just in the San Francisco Bay Area and Southern California, but also in the Central Valley.

Pfizer and its vaccine partner, BioNTech, said Wednesday that an initial lab study suggested that three doses of their vaccine may provide a robust protection against Omicron. Two doses may not be sufficient to protect against infection from Omicron, the companies said, although two doses may still protect against severe illness.

And Thursday, federal authorities gave the final green light to make 16- and 17-year-olds able to get booster shots.

In the Bay Area, demand is so high for shots and appointments so scarce that elected officials gave public health authorities a tongue-lashing over the difficulties in securing the shots.

Statewide, Pan said, one-third of fully vaccinated Californians who are eligible for a booster — because enough time has elapsed since they got their initial vaccinations — have received the extra shots, and 56% of seniors 65 and over have as well.

“That is good; we still need to make more progress. Some of our modeling show we really want to have 40%, 50%, 60% of people boosted to really address the waning immunity,” Pan said.

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HEADLINE	12/10 UN decries human rights abuse in Myanmar
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-decries-escalation-grave-human-rights-abuses-myanmar-2021-12-10/">https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-decries-escalation-grave-human-rights-abuses-myanmar-2021-12-10/</a>
GIST	<p>GENEVA, Dec 10 (Reuters) - The United Nations human rights office said on Friday that Myanmar's military was committing grave violations including killing 11 people and setting fire to their bodies.</p> <p>"We are appalled by the alarming escalation of grave human rights abuses in Myanmar," U.N. human rights spokesperson Rupert Colville told a Geneva briefing.</p> <p>"In the last week alone, security forces have killed and burned to death 11 people, among them five minors, and rammed vehicles into protesters exercising their fundamental right to peaceful assembly."</p>

	<p>U.S. State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday that the United States was <a href="#">outraged by reports</a> that Myanmar soldiers rounded up and killed 11 people in the northwestern region of Sagaing.</p> <p>There was no immediate reaction from Myanmar's military rulers to the accusations from the U.N. rights body.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/09 Russia, Ukraine talks falter: trade blame</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-ukraine-trade-blame-ceasefire-push-breaks-down-2021-12-09/">https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-ukraine-trade-blame-ceasefire-push-breaks-down-2021-12-09/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>KYIV/MOSCOW, Dec 10 (Reuters) - Ukraine and Russia blamed each other after a push to agree a new ceasefire in eastern Ukraine broke down late on Thursday as tensions over a Russian troop buildup near its southern neighbour persisted.</p> <p>Ukraine said Moscow had rejected a series of its proposals, including prisoner swaps, reopening a checkpoint and expanding a joint communications centre. Ukrainian troops have battled Russian-backed forces in its east since 2014.</p> <p>"Unfortunately, all initiatives of the Ukrainian side were rejected by the Russian Federation under contrived pretexts," a statement by Ukraine's delegation to the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG), which also includes Russia and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), said.</p> <p>Russia said late on Thursday that Kyiv had submitted "absolutely absurd" proposals and accused it of imitating negotiations at the talks.</p> <p>Moscow singled out a proposal to add Germany and France to the Joint Centre for Control and Coordination, a group tasked with implementing ceasefire agreements.</p> <p>"In such conditions, the Donetsk, Lugansk (separatist authorities) and the OSCE considered it impossible to continue talks. We are understanding of this decision," said Boris Gryzlov, Russia's envoy in the contact group.</p> <p>There was no immediate statement from the OSCE.</p> <p>Russia on Thursday kept up a barrage of hostile rhetoric towards Ukraine and compared the crisis there to the most dangerous moment of the Cold War as it waited for U.S. President Joe Biden to invite it to possible talks with NATO countries.</p> <p>It was not immediately clear if there would be new talks to try to get the ceasefire push back on track.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/10 Israel extends tough travel restrictions</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-health-travel-middle-east-6c9817f74bea07cd0f3776ddb78dcf8c">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-health-travel-middle-east-6c9817f74bea07cd0f3776ddb78dcf8c</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel decided on Thursday night to extend its tough travel restrictions including its entry ban on all foreign nationals for a further ten days, in a bid to stop further cases of the omicron variant of coronavirus entering the country.</p> <p>In a statement issued by Israel's Prime Minister, Neftali Bennett, and Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz, the restrictions on passengers arriving at Israel's Ben-Gurion International Airport will run until at least the 22 of December.</p>



	<p>Under the current requirements, all Israelis returning from abroad must self-quarantine until they receive confirmation of a negative coronavirus PCR test result, while those arriving from high-risk countries are required to isolate at a state-governed quarantine hotel until they receive a negative PCR test result.</p> <p>The statement also said additional restrictions and incentives for vaccination may be imposed in the coming days.</p> <p>Israel has identified at least 21 cases of the highly mutated omicron coronavirus variant first detected in southern Africa. Israel, a country of 9.3 million people, has reported 8,210 deaths from the coronavirus since the start of the pandemic. Most of its population — over 6.3 million people — has received at least one dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, and more than 4 million Israelis have received a booster.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Cold struggle: shortage snowplow drivers</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-storms-pennsylvania-e694fe4467db0116dd32fae4806d5dd8">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-storms-pennsylvania-e694fe4467db0116dd32fae4806d5dd8</a>
GIST	<p>HELENA, Mont. (AP) — More U.S. drivers could find themselves stuck on snowy highways or have their travel delayed this winter due to a shortage of snowplow drivers — a reality that could hit home Friday as winter storms start dumping snow from the Intermountain West to the Upper Great Lakes.</p> <p>States from Washington to Pennsylvania, including Montana and Wyoming in the Rocky Mountains, are having trouble finding enough people willing to take the comparatively low-paying jobs that require a Commercial Driver's License and often entail working at odd hours in dangerous conditions.</p> <p>“We want the traveling public to understand why it could take longer this season to clear highways during winter storms,” said Jon Swartz, the maintenance administrator for the Montana Department of Transportation, which is short about 90 drivers. “Knowing this helps motorists to plan ahead and adjust or even delay travel plans.”</p> <p>The labor shortage and lingering concerns about the pandemic have left employers scrambling to find enough school bus drivers, waiters, cooks and even teachers. The shortage comes as the number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits dropped last week to the lowest level in 52 years and some are seeking a better work-life balance.</p> <p>Several states are either already feeling the crunch or could be soon: Heavy snow is predicted in the coming days in large swaths of the country, including Utah and Colorado, where more than a foot (30 centimeters) is forecast in higher elevations. Over a half a foot could drop in parts of Nebraska and Iowa. Parts of Nevada and New Mexico also expect winter storms.</p> <p>State transportation departments say there are several reasons for a lack of snowplow drivers: the record low unemployment rate, an aging workforce and an increased demand for diesel mechanics and CDL drivers in other industries. Private companies can also be more nimble — raising salaries and offering bonuses to drivers — than state agencies, which usually have to get legislative approval to change salaries.</p> <p>“Everyone's sort of competing for the same group of workers and private companies can often offer higher salaries than the state government,” said Barbara LaBoe, spokesperson for Washington state's Department of Transportation.</p> <p>Along with the competitive market, LaBoe said Washington also lost 151 winter operations workers who did not want to comply with the state's COVID-19 vaccine mandate.</p> <p>One of the main competitors for states seeking workers with a Commercial Driver's License are private trucking companies that have been raising driver pay, in some cases several times this year, to fill their own shortages and meet the increasing demand to move freight and clear supply chain bottlenecks.</p>

The American Trucking Associations estimates there will be a record shortage of just over 80,000 drivers this year, and that doesn't include the shortfall in drivers for school buses, public transportation or snowplows.

The ATA says the shortage has many roots, including many drivers nearing retirement age, the pandemic causing some to leave the industry and training schools churning out fewer new drivers in 2020. Others may leave the industry because they don't like being away from home while an increase in the number of states legalizing marijuana leads to more drivers being unable to pass a drug test, the ATA says.

Some states are willing to hire snowplow drivers and pay for their CDL training, but it's not likely those hires will be ready to work this winter, officials said.

Some snowplow drivers work year-round in highway maintenance jobs, while seasonal workers are hired to fill the additional shifts in the winter.

The shortage is leading states to make plans to shift mechanics and other full-time employees who have Commercial Driver's Licenses into plows, which can cause problems if a plow needs maintenance work and the mechanic is out driving.

Wyoming has priorities for which roads will be plowed first and for how many hours per day plows will operate on each roadway. Interstate 80, the major east-west corridor across the southern part of the state, can be plowed around the clock while plowing stops on other roads, such as Interstates 90 and 25, between midnight at 4 a.m. Those guidelines may come into play more this year, said Luke Reiner, director of Wyoming's Department of Transportation.

In Washington, LaBoe said some roads and mountain passes will be closed longer than usual during and after significant storms and some roads may not receive the same level of service.

Brief or isolated storms won't cause problems in most states, in part because departments can move drivers and equipment around based on the weather forecast.

"If we have a series of storms over several days or if it hits the whole state at once, (the shortage) is going to become more evident because we don't have as deep a bench," LaBoe said.

Washington is still short about 150 seasonal and full-time workers, but things have improved since October when it was short 300 workers.

Even if states are able to hire drivers with commercial licenses, they still have to train them to run a snowplow and load the truck with salt and sand before learning a route.

"When you're plowing the road you need to know where the bridge abutment is and where the expansion joints are so you don't hook that with a plow," LaBoe said.

Pennsylvania is short 270 permanent positions and 560 temporary ones, but the Department of Transportation said that doesn't mean the roads will be treacherous this winter.

"Our goal is to keep roads safe and passable rather than completely free of ice and snow," said Alexis Campbell, spokesperson for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. The roads will be cleared once the snow stops, she said.

Ease of travel is important to businesses. Capitol Courier has contracts with deadlines to deliver electronic replacement parts from their warehouse in Helena, Montana, to about 30 businesses around the state as soon as they call.

"The roads are critical to what we do," said Shawn White Wolf, co-manager of Capitol Courier.

	<p>Snowplow drivers are devoted to their jobs, understanding their work is critical to the safety of the traveling public and to emergency responders, said Rick Nelson director of the winter maintenance technical service program for the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.</p> <p>Still, he understands that convincing newcomers “to be out there in the worst conditions” can be difficult.</p> <p>Nelson said the shortage means states will be shifting resources when they can and making sure roads are clear during times of peak demand while “you try to recruit, get out there and beat the bushes and convince folks that jumping in a plow in the middle of the night at Christmastime is a good career choice.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Companies rethink return-to-office plans</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-lifestyle-health-937d4c71e44781cf1d25ce6b56141eb0">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-lifestyle-health-937d4c71e44781cf1d25ce6b56141eb0</a>
GIST	<p>NEW YORK (AP) — Companies of all sizes are rethinking their plans to send workers back to the office as the new omicron variant adds another layer of uncertainty.</p> <p>Alphabet’s Google and the nation’s second largest automaker Ford Co. are among those once again delaying their return-to-office plans, while other businesses whose employees have already returned are considering adding extra precautions like requiring masks. Officials in the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway and Sweden also have asked people in recent days to work from home if they can because of concerns about the variant.</p> <p>Meta, formerly known as Facebook, and ridesharing company Lyft separately announced Tuesday that they’re letting workers delay their return when offices fully reopen early next year. Meta still plans to open its headquarters at the end of January but will allow workers to delay their return as late as June. Lyft says it won’t require workers to come back to its offices for all of next year, though they will fully reopen as planned in February.</p> <p>Janelle Gale, vice president of human resources for Meta, said the latest decision recognizes “some aren’t quite ready to come back.”</p> <p>The moves are the latest indication of how difficult it is for companies to set firm plans for their employees’ mandatory return as worries about a spike in new cases or new variants keep shifting deadlines. This fall, the delta variant spurred many big companies to postpone a mandatory return to early next year.</p> <p>“A year and a half ago, we thought this would be for a very short time,” said Jeff Levin-Scherz, population health leader at Willis Towers Watson, a global advisory firm. “But the pandemic has thrown us many curves, and employers need to continue to be nimble.”</p> <p>The firm’s survey of 543 employers with 5.2 million workers showed on average 34% of remote-capable employees remain remote, but that would decline to 27% by the first quarter of 2022. However, the survey was conducted before news of omicron surfaced.</p> <p>The delayed plans are yet another blow to already struggling restaurants, bars, dry cleaners and other businesses that rely on office workers as patrons. Particularly hard-hit are those in downtown or midtown areas of cities like New York dominated by office buildings that remain largely empty.</p> <p>The delays come even as U.S. health officials say early indications suggest omicron may be less dangerous than delta, which continues to fuel hospitalizations.</p> <p>Lawrence Gostin, a public health expert at Georgetown University, doesn’t believe there’s enough scientific information on omicron to warrant companies delaying their return-to-office plans.</p>

“There will be a constant stream of new variants as well as surges and waning of cases,” Gostin said. “We shouldn’t disrupt normal business activity at every possible trigger.”

He noted that layered protection like masks, vaccinations and ventilation are highly effective at preventing virus spread in a workplace.

Still, the stream of new variants is having a psychological impact on business owners.

“Omicron has made me realize work life will never return to the way it was pre-COVID,” said Gisela Girard, president of advertising agency Creative Civilization, whose 12 employees have been working remotely since March 2020. “It made me realize how working from home is likely to keep employees, their families and also our clients safe.”

This summer, Girard’s company aimed for a mandatory hybrid work plan to start in fall, but delta pushed back those plans to early next year. Now, omicron has her reconsidering not only those plans but whether employees should return at all. She renewed the office lease last year but said she’s rethinking the physical office space.

For companies that have already brought workers back to the office, it’s harder to retreat and allow them to be remote again. Still, some are considering new safety measures.

Kent Swig, president of Swig Equities LLC, a privately owned real estate investment and development company in Manhattan, said its 65 employees returned to the office in fall 2020 on a hybrid basis and went to five days a week in the office in May, after all were vaccinated.

However, Swig says he’s now closely monitoring the new variant and will consider mandating masks and even requiring COVID-19 testing a few times a week if the threat increases. He said he will reverse course and start hybrid or remote work if the situation gets worse.

“My first and foremost job is to protect all my staff,” Swig said. “I am going to err on the side of caution.”

Levin-Scherz noted many employers have set multiple dates for return to the workplace over the past year, and at this point are looking to resolve more uncertainty before they set new dates.

Target CEO Brian Cornell recently told The Associated Press that it’s “avoiding putting dates on the calendar” for a mandated return to its Minneapolis headquarters. Target started gradually opening collaboration areas and workspaces in the fall for employees who wanted an option to work on-site.

“We’re going to learn along the way and make sure we make the right steps for our team,” Cornell said.

Lyft said the decision to let workers choose to work remotely for all of 2022 wasn’t tied exclusively to omicron but said new variants are a factor contributing to uncertainty.

“We’ve heard from our team members that they value continued flexibility in determining where they work and would benefit from additional time to plan,” said Ashley Adams, a Lyft spokeswoman.

Meanwhile, Google is indefinitely delaying the mandatory return to its offices. A company spokesperson said in an email that the update was in line with its earlier guidance that a return would start no sooner than Jan. 10 and depend on local conditions. The company said it safely opened more than 90% of its U.S. offices and nearly 40% of U.S. workers came into the office in recent weeks.

Ford said Monday that it will delay plans for hybrid work at its Dearborn, Michigan, headquarters until March and plans to start a pilot phase for select employees in February. It had previously said it wouldn’t start the hybrid work model before January.

	Ford said that the hybrid work model affects approximately 18,000 employees in North America. Hourly manufacturing employees returned to work in May 2020.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 China cracks down on students in US</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20211209-even-on-u-s-campuses-china-cracks-down-on-students-who-speak-out">https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20211209-even-on-u-s-campuses-china-cracks-down-on-students-who-speak-out</a>
GIST	<p>On the bucolic campus of Purdue University in Indiana, deep in America's heartland and 7,000 miles from his home in China, Zhihao Kong thought he could finally express himself.</p> <p>In a rush of adrenaline last year, the graduate student posted an open letter on a dissident website praising the heroism of the students killed in the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.</p> <p>The blowback, he said, was fast and frightening. His parents called from China, crying. Officers of the Ministry of State Security, the feared civilian spy agency, had warned them about his activism in the United States.</p> <p>"They told us to make you stop or we are all in trouble," his parents said.</p> <p>Then other Chinese students at Purdue began hounding him, calling him a CIA agent and threatening to report him to the embassy and the MSS.</p> <p>Kong, who goes by the nickname Moody, had already accepted an invitation from an international group of dissidents to speak at a coming online commemoration of the Tiananmen massacre anniversary. Uncertain if he should go through with it, he joined in rehearsals for the event on Zoom.</p> <p>Within days, MSS officers were at his family's door again. His parents implored him: No public speaking. No rallies.</p> <p>Moody realized it didn't matter where he was. The Chinese government was still watching, and it was still in charge. Just before the anniversary event, he reluctantly decided not to give his speech.</p> <p>"I think that the Zoom rehearsals were known by the Chinese Communist Party," he said. "I think some of the Chinese students in my school are CCP members. I can tell they are not simply students. They could be spies or informants."</p> <p>As the regime of Chinese President Xi Jinping reaches across borders to control its citizens wherever they are, its assaults on academic freedom have intensified, according to U.S. national security officials, academics, dissidents and other experts. Chinese intelligence officers are monitoring campuses across the United States with online surveillance and an array of informants motivated by money, ambition, fear or authentic patriotism. A comment in class about Taiwan or a speech at a rally about Tibet can result in retaliation against students and their relatives back home.</p> <p>Students who don't conform to the "views and ideology of the Chinese Communist Party," said Mike Orlando, who leads the U.S. National Counterintelligence and Security Center, "risk being targeted for harassment." China's efforts to "suppress free speech and debate on U.S. campuses are concerning," he said.</p> <p>At Brandeis University near Boston, Chinese students mobilized last year to sabotage an online panel about atrocities against Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region. Viewers interrupted a Harvard-educated lawyer as she tried to describe her brother's plight in a concentration camp, scrawling "bullshit" and "fake news" over his face on the screen and blaring China's national anthem. To the dismay of participants, the university's leaders failed to condemn the incident.</p>

At the University of Georgia, a graduate student became the prey of an intelligence officer in China who pressured him over the phone to become a spy and inform on fellow dissidents in America. When the student made the conversations public, Chinese security forces harassed his family back home.

“It is real: the fear of being constantly watched, of being at risk,” said Chuangchuan Chen, a law student at St. John’s University in New York, whose dissident chat group on the encrypted Telegram platform was hacked. “If there are more than three or four Chinese students in the same class, you are scared to talk. A Chinese student is definitely seen in good favor by the Chinese government for reporting someone.”

U.S. law enforcement agencies have struggled to respond because much of the censorship and harassment occurs in a legal gray area. Victims are often frightened or don’t believe anyone can help. And university administrators are not always eager to intercede because it means risking a lucrative financial stream. U.S. universities have received more than \$1 billion in donations from mainland China — from individuals, companies, government organizations — since 2013, according to the Department of Education. That doesn’t include tuition paid by Chinese students, whose numbers in the U.S. reached 370,000 in 2019. Moreover, the complexities of free speech and identity politics make administrators even more reluctant to confront Chinese state influence.

“It is easier to take a stance against the United States than against China,” said Rayhan Asat, the Uyghur scholar who was the target of the incident at Brandeis. “That is what is happening at U.S. universities. They are self-censoring themselves in order to recruit Chinese students for economic benefit.”

As a result, no one is doing much to prevent persecution by a foreign dictatorship in supposed bastions of learning and freedom, said U.S. national security officials, academics, dissidents and other experts.

“This is an overall extension of the police state,” said Anna Puglisi, a senior fellow at Georgetown University who served until last year as the U.S. intelligence community’s national counterintelligence officer for East Asia. “It is brazen. But when you talk about it, people act as if you’re nuts. There has been no cost to China for this.”

In 2019, university and national security officials met at a coastal resort in Maryland to discuss China-related threats. Many of the educators seemed oblivious to the repression in their midst, participants said. One skeptical administrator had never even heard of WeChat, the ubiquitous social media app used by Chinese students to communicate and by their government to shadow them, said Sophie Richardson, the China director of Human Rights Watch, who spoke at the conference.

“You realized how poorly understood some mainland students’ experiences are at U.S. universities,” Richardson said. “If the mainland students aren’t enjoying academic freedom to the same extent as others, that means universities are failing them. There is a certain amount of denial and a remarkable lack of awareness.”

Several university leaders who attended the conference declined to be interviewed. A rift between universities and the government over China worsened during President Donald Trump’s administration, whose policies were seen as hawkish and even racist by critics in academia. When then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave a speech in December raising the specter of China meddling on U.S. college campuses — from stealing secrets to censoring students — some university officials dismissed it as overblown rhetoric.

“The reaction I was getting was: ‘This hostility with China, it’s Trump-driven. It will go away,’” said one U.S. intelligence official who talks with university leaders. “I said, ‘As long as Xi Jinping is in power, it will get worse.’”

Some educators, even China experts, warn against exaggerating the scope of the threat. Professor James Millward of Georgetown University, a historian of Xinjiang and critic of China’s repression there, witnessed the abuse of Asat at Brandeis. But he said he hasn’t seen that kind of aggressiveness in his own classes.

“I don’t have experience, in my teaching, of disruptions or hyper-nationalistic students,” Millward said. “My students and their parents are more concerned about anti-Asian hate, being attacked on the street. Most Chinese students just want to get educated and get on with their business.”

But recent studies by Human Rights Watch and the French Defense Ministry highlight increasing activity that exploits democratic freedoms across North America, Australia and Europe. Pro-China forces on campuses have assaulted, stalked, threatened and doxxed dissidents and scholars. Last month in Germany, a publishing company said pressure from Chinese diplomats caused two universities to cancel presentations of a biography of Xi written by German journalists.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington did not respond to ProPublica’s requests for comment. In the past, Chinese officials have denied allegations that they engage in censorship and spying at foreign universities.

To assess the extent of Chinese repression on U.S. campuses and the limits of the response, ProPublica interviewed Chinese students and scholars and reviewed emails, texts and other online communications that documented their experiences. ProPublica also spoke with current and former national security officials, educators, human rights advocates and other experts in the United States and overseas, and reviewed reports by governments, academics and human rights groups.

Most experts say U.S. and university officials could, and should, be doing more. Just as colleges shut down fraternities for hazing and other misconduct, they should crack down on wrongdoing by Chinese students associations, which often lead the attack on fellow students and proclaim their cooperation with the Chinese regime, the U.S. intelligence official said.

“I used to think universities were victims,” the intelligence official said. “But now I think those that take money from China and don’t protect their students from [People’s Republic of China] harassment may be complicit.”

Rayhan Asat was on edge.

It was Nov. 13, 2020. Asat, a lawyer specializing in human rights and international corruption cases, was looking forward to the panel sponsored by Brandeis University. She wanted to tell the story of her brother, Ekpar, a 35-year-old entrepreneur and one of more than a million people who have been imprisoned in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

A roster of experts had assembled for the discussion on Zoom. Founded in 1948 by the American Jewish community, Brandeis seemed a receptive setting for a forum about the atrocities against the Uyghurs, an onslaught that the U.S. government has described as genocide.

But Asat was worried about rumblings of opposition. The Chinese students association had led the campaign, sending letters to the university president and others complaining about the event’s title, “Cultural Genocide,” and the “negative influence” on the Chinese community.

As the panel got underway, Asat recalled, she had a bad feeling. There were about 70 viewers. Many of them masked their identities with icons, including photos of Xi. During a talk by a professor from Indiana University, someone played a recording of the Chinese national anthem; the moderator kicked out the disrupter.

Finally, it was Asat’s turn. Launching into her PowerPoint presentation, she was ambushed. Insults appeared onscreen over the photos of her brother in a multicolored, crayonlike scrawl: “Bullshit,” “Fake News,” “hypocritical,” “rumors.” She felt as if an invisible hand were trying to erase Ekpar. The Chinese anthem blared again, another attempt to rattle her.

“It was incredibly disheartening,” Asat said. “I couldn’t control my screen. I kept talking. I was trying to maintain my composure, stay calm. I spoke for about 15 minutes, and it went on the whole time.”

The other panelists frantically communicated with one another and university technicians to try to stop the Zoom bombing by someone who was using the video conferencing program's annotation feature.

"The only Uyghur on the entire panel was targeted," said Leon Grinis, a student who organized the discussion. "They were definitely denying her voice and her story. I felt terrible for Rayhan. It was really admirable for her to push on and continue."

The event, designed to highlight a horror unfolding in Xinjiang, ended up bringing attention to a harsh reality in the United States, Asat and other panelists said: widespread interference on U.S. campuses that is often directed or encouraged by the Chinese state.

Asat spoke at the invitation of Grinis, who was then a junior. Grinis said he is "partial to marginalized peoples" because his family suffered during the Holocaust in Germany and was persecuted in the Soviet Union. Using a \$2,000 grant, he organized the panel of scholars, which included Millward, the Georgetown historian.

The repression of the Uyghurs, a predominantly Muslim group of Turkic ethnicity, has not spared elite families like Asat's. She considers herself an advocate for her people but not an anti-China dissident. Her parents are loyal members of the Chinese Communist Party. Ekpar was a rising entrepreneur who developed a successful social media application in Xinjiang and took part in government-sponsored events there. In 2016, the State Department invited him to spend three weeks in the United States as part of its leadership program for talented foreigners.

After Ekpar's return to China, however, the security forces abducted him, and he disappeared into the region's vast complex of concentration camps. His family only found out last year that he had been sentenced to 15 years in prison on vague charges of "inciting ethnic hatred." Asat believes authorities singled him out because of the State Department program. She has been working to free him since his imprisonment.

At Brandeis, students from China make up the largest group of foreign students, according to the university's website. The campus has a robust Chinese Students and Scholars Association, which led the letter-writing campaign against the panel.

University computer technicians could not identify the culprits involved in the disruption because the panel had used Grinis' personal Zoom account rather than a school account. But it became clear that the incident was not spontaneous. Apologetic Chinese students told Asat and other panelists privately that members of the CSSA mobilized to sabotage the event.

"They planned the whole thing," Asat said. "They created a WeChat group for it. Everything was planned on WeChat."

Asat suspects that students were not the only ones involved. "I can see the Chinese government's hand behind it," she said.

The Chinese government has played a role in similar incidents. In 2019, officials at China's consulate in Toronto coordinated with the CSSA at McMaster University before a lecture by a Uyghur activist. On WeChat, the consular officials instructed students to identify Chinese nationals who attended, according to an investigation by The Washington Post. Students disrupted the speech and took photos and videos of the audience and provided them to Chinese officials. The university revoked the club status of the CSSA chapter as a result.

At Brandeis, hard evidence implicating the CSSA in the abusive behavior was lacking. But even after the ugly scene during Asat's talk, Chinese students sent another round of letters to administrators criticizing the panel. A response sent by sponsors of the event, at the behest of Brandeis administrators, recounted



what had happened. The strongest wording said that some audience members had asked questions in an “especially hostile manner that was offensive and disrespectful.”

Asat said she had expected the university’s top leaders to issue an emphatic public condemnation.

“I am disappointed that Brandeis didn’t find a way to make a very strong statement making sure this never happened again,” she said. “If this was an event about addressing racism or discrimination against any other marginalized or oppressed groups in America, I can imagine the reaction would have been different.”

Other participants agreed. Gordon Fellman, a sociology professor, said a response from the university’s president, Ronald Liebowitz, would have been appropriate.

“The university really didn’t condemn this,” Fellman said. “Many of us were puzzled. We thought it called for a strong condemnation.”

Because of the silence, Grinis contacted the student newspaper, which eventually wrote about the incident, as did Voice of America.

In an email, Brandeis’ assistant vice president for communications, Julie Jette, said the university had taken steps to prevent such a disruption from happening again.

“The interruption of last year’s panel including Rayhan Asat was entirely unacceptable,” she said. “Brandeis regrets that this occurred, and we strongly affirm our commitment to presenting multiple viewpoints and protecting free speech within our community.”

The university did not answer questions about why it did not respond more forcefully at the time of the incident or whether financial considerations related to Chinese students had an effect.

The Chinese Embassy and the Chinese students association did not respond to requests for comment.

Echoes of the incident still nag at Asat, who is now on a fellowship at Yale.

“Where do I seek justice?” she said. “Where do I go? I don’t have many platforms. My avenues of speaking are limited. One of them is universities.”

The diaspora of hundreds of thousands of students and scholars overseas poses a challenge for China.

On one hand, the communist regime wants and needs students at foreign universities to gather knowledge, especially in scientific and technical fields. On the other, it fears that they will absorb the influences of Western democratic ideas in the process.

To detect perceived anti-China activities, experts say, the authoritarian state has built a global machine that reacts in real time. The government’s well-documented ties to Chinese Students and Scholars Associations date from the 1970s, when the Communist Party created them “to monitor Chinese students and mobilize them against views that dissent,” according to a State Department fact sheet.

The associations are overseen by the “United Front Work Department, a sprawling worldwide network of party loyalists whose purpose is to influence local elites and community leaders,” according to the State Department. “Diplomatic posts often provide funding and guidance to individual CSSA chapters, such as directing members to disrupt lectures or events.”

In 2017, the CSSA at the University of California San Diego created an uproar about a commencement speech by the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet. The university stood firm, and the Dalai Lama spoke. In response, the Chinese government barred students and scholars on state-funded scholarships from attending the university, according to a report by the Hoover Institution at Stanford.

In June of this year, the CSSA at the University of Chicago complained that a speaking invitation to Nathan Law, a leader of the democracy movement in Hong Kong, showed “insensitivities and disrespect.” Law accused the group of being a tool of the Communist Party; the CSSA described itself as a “non-political, cultural organization.”

The associations do play a traditional role for many students on foreign turf, helping them find roommates, offering safety tips, recommending places to eat. At the same time, many chapters do not hide their official ties. From Cornell to the University of Michigan to Pasadena City College, CSSA social media pages make clear that the groups are “approved,” “recognized” and “supported” by the Chinese Embassy and consulates.

In a rare case in 2015, Columbia University disciplined its CSSA chapter, shutting it down briefly for unspecified “ongoing violations of multiple financial and student organizational policies.” The CSSA and the university quickly reached an agreement allowing the group to regain its official status.

Beijing has entrusted CSSAs with the vital mission of monitoring students and suppressing dissent — a system that functions with near impunity on U.S. campuses, according to national security officials, human rights experts, educators and dissidents. University officials tend to refrain from wading into the quagmire of conflict between dissidents and pro-regime students, who are in the majority.

“It is inconvenient for universities to recognize how pervasive this problem is,” said Puglisi, the former national counterintelligence officer for East Asia.

The FBI has jurisdiction over suspected foreign intelligence activity. But some acts — such as the persecution in China of relatives of a student in the U.S. — are not crimes here. If Chinese diplomats direct CSSA members to spy on their peers, prosecutors could theoretically file charges of acting as unregistered foreign agents, a frequent charge in espionage cases.

In practice, it’s unlikely, according to counterintelligence veterans. Diplomats have immunity. Surveillance of their interactions with informants on campus is difficult to use in the courts. Most resources go to battling China’s espionage offensive against government, scientific and corporate targets.

“What U.S. law is broken?” said retired FBI agent Joshua Skule, who led the agency’s intelligence directorate until two years ago. “Think how we would connect the dots. Parents say someone contacted them. How do we figure out who did something on U.S. soil? It’s hard. We are dealing with speech issues, academic environments that can be very touchy about law enforcement. Harassment might get reported, but it doesn’t rise in terms of FBI priorities on the China threat.”

The Chinese Embassy did not respond to ProPublica’s requests for comment. But when the U.S. government shut down China’s consulate in Houston for alleged misconduct last year, Chinese diplomats denied accusations by senior U.S. officials that consulates in the West supported counterdemonstrations related to Hong Kong, planted informants at universities and undermined free speech.

“The ‘China-supported counter protests,’ as claimed by the US, were spontaneous, rational patriotic actions by Chinese students in exercising their freedom of speech,” the Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement in July of 2020.

In fact, Chinese students don’t necessarily need orders from an intelligence handler to report on each other, experts said. They often do it spontaneously, their motives ranging from fear to ambition to sincere patriotism. Academic freedom protects pro-regime students as it does everyone else.

“There is self-censorship among my Chinese students,” said Elanah Uretsky, a professor of international and global studies at Brandeis. “There are things that they are willing to discuss with me in private but not in class. In classes on sensitive topics, I’ve also noticed that Chinese students are careful to be the only Chinese student enrolled in such classes. But I also have good conversations about Xinjiang in my classes that include a range of viewpoints among Chinese students.”

Even as a teenager in China, Zhihao Kong had doubts about the official version of history. He set up a virtual private network to access the internet, reading about the student protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989, when hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people died.

“I was very shocked,” he said. “Because I learned that the Tiananmen massacre had been totally different from what the Chinese Communist Party had taught us.”

While in college in China, he grew interested in Christianity and became a Protestant. His political awakening, meanwhile, began in earnest when he came to Purdue two years ago to continue his studies in engineering. Kong, whose nickname is Moody, said the trigger was the pandemic. Moody believed that China had worsened the outbreak by covering it up. The claims by Chinese leaders that COVID-19 had originated in the United States appalled him. In March 2020, he made a statement on social media: He condemned the regime for misleading the world and apologized in the name of the Chinese people.

“The most important thing is to stand up and speak out,” he said in an interview. “Not everyone has the opportunity to study here. I have the responsibility to say something. ... Those students who are in China, even if they are pro-democracy, they know that if they speak out, they will be detained immediately.”

That May, he went further. He posted his open letter invoking the heroism of the protesters killed by the People’s Liberation Army in Tiananmen Square 31 years earlier.

“The future of democratization in China remains bleak,” he wrote. “We are young Chinese students who share the values of democracy and freedom, and we are fortunate to learn the message of the free world thanks to God. Thirty-one years ago, students who fell at the gun of PLA on the streets of Beijing became a topic that China could not mention. ... We refuse to be silent.”

Days later, officers from the Ministry of State Security visited his parents.

His parents “were crying in the phone call. My father was urging me to stop such activities,” Moody said.

There were also repercussions on campus. Like millions of his peers, Moody spent hours on WeChat, the Chinese-language app that is its own world of social activity and information — and a target of surveillance. Moody had also posted his open letter on a chat group of the Purdue Chinese Students and Scholars Association, and the members went after him with a vengeance.

“Suspicion of participating in espionage organization that aims at overthrowing the government, we can call 12339,” wrote one student, according to a screenshot seen by ProPublica. The phone number is a hotline for reporting subversion to the MSS.

“For now you have violated PRC’s ‘Anti-Secession Law,’” warned another student. “According to this law we can indeed report your real name.”

“Let’s vote to kick this person out,” chimed in a third.

Moody said he started avoiding other Chinese students. WeChat blocked or suspended his account several times.

Despite a growing sense of dread, he still wanted to play a role in the pro-democracy movement. His letter had caught the attention of a revered survivor of Tiananmen Square, who invited him to speak during an online commemoration of the anniversary of the June 4 massacre. Moody joined dissidents from around the world in rehearsals and planning sessions on Zoom.

Three days before the anniversary, his parents called again.

“My parents clearly told me do not accept interviews, do not attend activities,” he said. “I think the authorities knew my plans. I had to quit that meeting.”

His suspicions seem well-founded. In November 2020, U.S. prosecutors indicted a Chinese security executive who worked for Zoom in Zhejiang Province. They charged him with conspiring with MSS officers to identify U.S. planners of Tiananmen anniversary events by monitoring the rehearsals and gathering IP addresses. Intelligence officers then pressured dissidents not to speak at the events, harassing their families in China, court papers say.

Moody doesn’t know if he was a target in that case. But he thinks he was under surveillance at his school and by Chinese security forces monitoring communications.

Dissidents told ProPublica they agonize over the brutal choice of staying silent or speaking out. Chen, the St. John’s student, recounted a phone conversation with his mother after China’s secret police had harassed her about his activities in the U.S.

“My mother asked me: ‘What if I die because of this?’” Chen recalled. “I said, ‘If that happens, it’s not because of me, it is the Chinese government.’ When I decided to join a pro-democracy group here in 2012, I knew it would not be safe to go back to China. And I decided not to have much contact with my family, to protect them. I haven’t seen my family for nine years.”

Being new to activism, Moody said, he didn’t ask anyone for help. It might not have made a difference, based on the experience of a student at Florida State University.

In May, Yang Wang incurred the wrath of fellow students at FSU for posting a link on WeChat to a U.S. congressional hearing about atrocities against Uyghurs. Leaders of the CSSA insulted him, threatened to report him to the Chinese Embassy and news media, and kicked him out of their WeChat group, screenshots seen by ProPublica show. Twenty days later, he said, police visited his family in China.

Wang reported the CSSA to the university. An investigations office reviewed his complaint.

“They said they couldn’t do anything,” he said. “They said it was freedom of speech.”

Wang said he received no response to letters he sent to the FBI and a senator’s office.

Wang acknowledges that FSU officials reacted sympathetically, and he had a series of meetings and communications with them. They suggested that he could find kindred spirits at the campus branch of Amnesty International. One administrator said she had not met any other Chinese students who openly supported human rights causes, he recalled.

“She was surprised to see a student like me,” he said. “I think the university can’t do much. They want to help me. I can speak what I want to speak, but they can’t openly help me.”

ProPublica confirmed Wang’s account through records of his communications and interactions with university officials and students. FSU did not respond to questions from ProPublica.

In Indiana, meanwhile, Moody is coming to grips with his new reality.

“I knew I could get in trouble,” Moody said. “I didn’t know it could be so severe. My parents said they are probably banned from travel. And that I am banned from returning from China. They say I would be detained if I return. I am still young. I didn’t expect this to happen.”

Sulaiman Gu set a trap for a hunter.

It was January 2018. Gu, a graduate student in chemistry at the University of Georgia, had been preparing a bold scheme with a friend and fellow dissident living in Australia.

The friend had endured years of harassment by an officer of the Chinese Ministry of Public Security, which does domestic intelligence as well as police work, according to Gu and records he compiled. Based in Anhui Province, the officer had once arrested the friend during pro-democracy protests inspired by uprisings in the Arab world in 2011. Ever since, the officer had hounded him, continuing to call him and harass his parents in China even after the friend moved to Australia, Gu said.

The two young men decided that the friend would introduce Gu by phone to the police officer. They believed Gu was appealing bait because authorities knew him as an outspoken activist. They hoped to lure the officer into a conversation and try to confirm the existence of a rumored blacklist for students overseas.

“We pretended we were afraid,” Gu explained in an interview. “We said as dissidents we knew we were in trouble, and we wanted to come home to work.”

They attempted to find out if there was a blacklist by asking if they were on it, Gu said. Instead the spymaster “thought he could weaponize our fear.”

As Gu listened incredulously, the officer launched into a recruitment pitch on the phone. He warned Gu to stop talking about sensitive issues like Xinjiang and Tibet. But he said there was one shot at redemption: Gu could work as an informant. In phone conversations and text exchanges, the officer urged him to gather intelligence on pro-democracy activists in the United States. If he became a spy, life would improve for him and his relatives at home, said the officer, who identified himself as Xu Yongquan.

“In that way I can organize it and report it upward, so that those up there can know about your current thoughts and situation,” the officer wrote in a text seen by ProPublica. “This would change their opinion about you, it is beneficial to you coming back to China.”

Gu played along, recording and documenting the communications. He took the information to Radio Free Asia, which published a report. To Gu’s surprise, the officer called him afterward as if nothing had happened. Gu realized that he had not yet seen the story; apparently China’s censorship firewall limits the access of even the secret police to the Western press. The officer continued trying to recruit him for a few more days, sharing some personal details.

“He told me he was a learned guy,” Gu said. “He had graduated from law school. He was able to discuss ancient Roman laws, the British Parliament, ideas about different legal systems.”

Finally, the officer discovered that Gu had publicly outed him. In angry calls and texts, the officer called him “evil” and “a complete clown,” according to screenshots seen by ProPublica.

Soon, authorities in China retaliated, Gu said. They harassed Gu’s family and froze its control over a property in his name worth more than \$300,000.

The Chinese Embassy did not respond to a request for comment about the case.

The episode fits an international pattern of Chinese security forces, often officers based in the provinces, attempting to recruit expatriates over the phone with threats as well as offers of money, leniency or bureaucratic favors, according to dissidents and national security officials.

But a scholar in the United Kingdom who has occasional contact with Chinese officials described experiences with different, more direct tactics. The scholar told ProPublica that intelligence officers ask about students — queries that the scholar politely evades.

“The activity is not even hidden anymore,” said the scholar, who asked to remain anonymous for safety reasons. “It is far more apparent and blatant. They want me to talk about my Chinese students. They are not even very shy about it. They want to know if they can sit in on classes to scope out the Chinese

students. They ask: ‘Which Chinese students do you have, where are they from, what are you teaching them?’”

Unlike some dissidents who sound worn down by their struggle, Gu remains spirited and defiant. He calls out spies for stalking him and his fellow dissidents.

“Dear Chinese police,” he wrote in a tweet, “you won’t get my address as you repeatedly demand, but I’m glad to share that I live in a Castle Law state where a Chinese operative intruding a house can be legally shot by the resident.”

Gu has been politically engaged since his college years in China. He is a Hui Muslim from Sichuan Province. The Hui are a population of about 10 million who converted to Islam centuries ago and live in a number of provinces and regions, including Xinjiang. Traditionally, the Hui have suffered less oppression than the Uyghurs, but the government’s treatment of them has worsened in recent years.

For safety reasons, Gu declined to discuss whether he has had contact with U.S. government officials about his public clash with the Chinese police officer. But he said he feels safe in this country because the authorities are more vigilant here than in others.

“The repression is worse in Australia and Canada,” he said.

On some fronts, there has been progress in countering Chinese state interference at U.S. universities, experts say. Since 2014, American universities have shut down 89 Confucius Institutes, which are campus language and cultural centers controlled by the Chinese government, because of concerns that they engage in propaganda and censorship.

Universities and federal agencies have also improved cooperation against the theft of secrets by Chinese spies on campus, though some educators complain that U.S. law enforcement has overreacted.

But Richardson, the China director at Human Rights Watch, said that the priority for both academia and the government has been the espionage threat rather than “the more complicated conversation about censorship, self-censorship and academic freedom.”

Chinese students say they find themselves caught in the crossfire. Their police state stalks them; U.S. officialdom sees them as potential spies; anti-Asian hate crimes endanger them on the street. It can be a lonely and paranoid existence.

FBI agents try to be responsive, according to Chen and others who have dealt with them.

“The FBI is in contact with many dissidents here,” Chen said. “They try to get information. What they do is definitely not enough. I don’t blame the FBI. I believe the local police should get involved, they have more resources and local knowledge.”

Counterintelligence work is difficult, especially building prosecutions, but much of it takes place out of public view, officials said. Federal agents use a range of tactics to try to disrupt networks targeting students, such as blocking visas for suspects, intimidating them with visits or alerting universities to their operations.

“We have the authority to take more action on campuses, but it would be invasive,” the U.S. intelligence official said. “And the repression is a gray area in terms of legal and illegal. There is no one solution.”

One proposal popular among national security experts would encourage universities to give Chinese students U.S. cellphones upon arrival, protecting their privacy here and severing the electronic tether to China.

	<p>Meanwhile, some professors improvise protective strategies, such as allowing just one Chinese student per seminar group or publishing thesis papers anonymously. A graduate of one New York university recalled a professor warning her to wipe her essays about human rights from her computer hard drive if she returned to China.</p> <p>Gu said there is a more fundamental problem at play: Pro-regime forces are skilled at exploiting the U.S. emphasis on political correctness, trying to persuade academic communities that criticism of authoritarianism in China equates to anti-Chinese bias.</p> <p>“American universities tend to treat these issues as issues of racism and diversity,” Gu said. “The university should support students against the surveillance of a foreign government. They should take measures to let educated and legitimate opinions be expressed without fear.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Early vax surveys fell to ‘big data paradox’</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20211209-big-data-paradox-2-early-vaccination-surveys-worse-than-worthless">https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20211209-big-data-paradox-2-early-vaccination-surveys-worse-than-worthless</a>
GIST	<p>When Delphi-Facebook and the U.S. Census Bureau provided estimates of COVID-19 vaccine uptake last spring, their weekly reports drew on responses from as many as 250,000 people.</p> <p>The data sets boasted statistically tiny margins of error, raising confidence that the numbers were correct. But when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported actual vaccination rates, the two polls were off — by a lot. By the end of May, the Delphi-Facebook study had overestimated vaccine uptake by 17 percentage points — 70 percent versus 53 percent, according to the CDC — and the Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey had done the same by 14 percentage points.</p> <p>A comparative analysis by statisticians and political scientists from Harvard, Oxford, and Stanford universities concludes that the surveys fell victim to the “big data paradox,” a mathematical tendency of big data sets to minimize one type of error — due to small sample size — but magnify another that tends to get less attention: flaws linked to systematic biases that make the sample a poor representation of the larger population.</p> <p>The big data paradox was identified and coined by one of the study’s authors, Harvard’s <a href="#">Xiao-Li Meng</a>, the Whipple V.N. Jones Professor of Statistics, in his <a href="#">2018 analysis</a> of polling during the 2016 presidential election.</p> <p>Famous for predicting a Hillary Clinton victory, the polls were skewed by “nonresponse bias,” which in this case was the tendency of Trump voters to either not respond or define themselves as “undecided.”</p> <p>A biased big data survey can be worse than no survey at all, says Meng, because with no survey, researchers at least understand that they don’t know the answer. When underlying bias is poorly understood — as in the 2016 election — it can be masked by confidence created by the large sample size, leading researchers and readers astray.</p> <p>“The larger the data size, the surer we fool ourselves when we fail to account for bias in data collection,” the paper’s authors wrote in their <a href="#">analysis</a>, published Wednesday in the journal <a href="#">Nature</a>.</p> <p>The misleading results can be particularly harmful when actions are based on them, the authors note. The governor of a state where a survey shows that 70 percent are vaccinated against COVID, for example, might relax public health measures. If actual vaccination rates are closer to 55 percent, the move could result in a spike in cases and a rise in COVID deaths.</p> <p>“All around the world, policymakers and scientific advisers are trying to make sense of COVID data,” said Seth Flaxman, an associate professor at Oxford University, 2008 alumnus of Harvard’s computer science and mathematics program, and corresponding author in the paper. “Reported cases are a fraction of true</p>

infections, COVID-19-attributed deaths are a severe undercount of the true toll of this pandemic, and electronic medical records do not give us the full picture of long COVID. When it comes to survey data, all sorts of data quality issues, such as vaccinated respondents being more likely to respond to surveys and marginalized groups being underrepresented, can lead to incorrect estimates.”

Though it is broadly known that survey accuracy comes from both data quantity and data quality, quantity has stolen the spotlight in recent years as technology has dramatically increased our ability to collect and process massive data sets. The imbalance should put investigators on guard, said Shiro Kuriwaki, a first author of the paper who received his Ph.D. in government from Harvard last spring and is now a postdoctoral fellow at Stanford.

“There’s this drive to get the biggest data sets possible and modern technology, big data, has made that possible,” Kuriwaki said. “What that allows is analysis at a more granular level than ever before, but we need to be mindful that biases in the data get worse with bigger sample size, and that can carry right to the subgroups.”

Meng began thinking about the problems posed by big data when he and other statisticians met with a visiting U.S. Census official at Harvard a decade ago. Using the hypothetical of tax data collected by the IRS, the official asked the statisticians whether they would prefer a sample covering 5 percent of the population that they knew was representative of the larger population, or IRS data that they weren’t sure was representative but covered 80 percent of the population. The statisticians chose the 5 percent. “What if it was 90 percent?” the official asked. The statisticians still chose the 5 percent, because a solid understanding of the data meant that their answer would likely be more accurate than one based on a larger set with unknown biases.

“Every data set is going to have certain quirks, but the question is whether the quirk matters to whatever your problem is,” said Meng, whose work is partially funded by the National Science Foundation. “Social media has tons of data just sitting there. And they may think they have a public sample, but may not realize that their population is biased to start.”

Indeed, nonresponse bias remains pernicious even when researchers are mindful of it. For example, a 2020 article by Kuriwaki and another co-author of the current study, Harvard undergraduate Michael Isakov, correctly predicted overconfidence in 2020 presidential election polls even after new methods had been introduced in the aftermath of 2016.

“In the current paper, we found that while both the Delphi-Facebook and Census Bureau researchers attempted to account for potential issues, their corrections were simply not enough to alleviate all of the bias,” Isakov said.

The study — conducted with Oxford’s Dino Sejdinovic — identifies areas of potential bias in the vaccination polls. The Delphi-Facebook reports, which drew from daily users of the social media site, didn’t account for factors like education level and race and ethnicity. The Census Bureau study corrected for both education and race and ethnicity, but neither survey collected data on partisanship of respondents, which may influence vaccine uptake. Also, neither adjusted their sample to represent distribution of urban and rural areas, another potentially important factor.

“The U.S. government is spending billions of dollars this year doing targeted outreach to try to get people who are not vaccinated, vaccinated,” said Valerie Bradley ’14, an alumna of Harvard’s statistics program, Ph.D. student at Oxford University, and a first author of the paper. “And if you are guiding that based on the Census Household Pulse or Facebook survey, you might be pouring literally billions of dollars into the wrong communities.”

By comparison, researchers running a more traditional poll, conducted by Axios-Ipsos with just 1,000 respondents, took pains to ensure the sample was representative of the larger population. They accounted for education, race, ethnicity, political partisanship, and even provided tablets with internet access to



	<p>“offline” respondents to ensure their points of view were registered. Despite the smaller sample size, the Axios-Ipsos estimates of vaccine uptake were similar to CDC numbers.</p> <p>The ultimate effect of the uncorrected bias in the large polls, the authors said, was that the Delphi-Facebook poll, despite surveying 250,000 respondents, had an effective sample size when adjusted for bias of less than 10 in April 2021, a 99.99 percent reduction from their raw average weekly sample size. Similarly, the Census Household Pulse, which tallied 75,000 responses weekly, also had an effective sample size 99 percent lower in May 2021.</p> <p>“If you have the resources, invest in data quality far more than you invest in data quantity,” Meng said. “Bad-quality data is essentially wiping out the power you think you have. That’s always been a problem, but it’s magnified now because we have big data.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 New master question list synthetic opioids</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/dhs/dhs-st-releases-new-master-question-list-for-synthetic-opioids/">https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/dhs/dhs-st-releases-new-master-question-list-for-synthetic-opioids/</a>
GIST	<p>The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) <a href="#">Science and Technology Directorate</a> (S&amp;T) has released a new <a href="#">Master Question List (MQL) for Synthetic Opioids</a>. The MQL is a reference guide to assist emergency responders and the research community by providing critical and scientifically-vetted information about the chemical and physical properties of synthetic opioids and the hazards they pose in operational settings. The resource summarizes what is known about opioids, so experts can quickly find knowledge gaps and identify solutions, and first responders have on-hand guidance based on current scientific understanding to protect themselves from opioid exposure. Opioid drug overdose deaths in the U.S. are at a record high as new <a href="#">data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</a> (CDC) identifies fentanyl as the leading cause of more than 100,000 deaths over the past year.</p> <p>“The CDC data confirms that America’s synthetic opioids epidemic is one of the biggest public health challenges of our time, poses significant hazards to emergency responders, and requires a whole-of-government response,” said Kathryn Coulter Mitchell, DHS Senior Official Performing Duties of the Under Secretary for Science and Technology. “That is why we have pulled on every lever of our organization to develop a resource with the best scientific knowledge available to keep emergency responders safe.”</p> <p>Synthetic opioids present unique and significant challenges to first responders. The compounds are highly toxic, deadly, and aerosols may remain at the scene well after responders arrive. This creates a challenge to develop safe decontamination protocols, effective personal protective gear and detection equipment.</p> <p>S&amp;T’s Chemical Security Analysis Center (CSAC) and the Office of Mission and Capability Support’s Opioid Detection Program collaborated with the Hazard Assessment and Characterization Technology Center (HAC-TC) and the Probabilistic Analysis for National Threats and Hazards and Risks (PANTHR) to develop the Synthetic Opioids MQL. The CSAC lab serves as a national knowledge and resource center for chemical threats and hazards. Related efforts delivered through CSAC include knowledge products used for detection and interdiction of illicit opioids, including a Fentanyl Synthesis Quick Reference Guide, and the Chemical Agent Reactions Database (CARD), featuring extensive data related to more than 2,000 chemical reactions designed to help law enforcement authorities identify harmful chemicals and what “chemicals of interest” could be produced from them.</p> <p>“Until synthetic opioid abuse is eradicated, we’ll continue to do everything in our power to provide useful scientific insights that when used as best practices, can keep our operators in the field as safe as possible,” said Jessica Cox, S&amp;T CSAC Program Manager for the MQL. “This work can save lives, and we will continue to do our part to counter the abuse of synthetic opioids which have devastated communities across the country.”</p>

	The Synthetic Opioids MQL currently focuses on synthetic opioids commonly found in the illicit drug trade. DHS S&T will update the MQL periodically as new knowledge becomes publicly available.
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	Click on link to download PDF: <a href="https://www.dhs.gov/publication/st-master-question-list-synthetic-opioids">https://www.dhs.gov/publication/st-master-question-list-synthetic-opioids</a>

HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Seattle firefighter dies suddenly before shift</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/seattle-firefighter-dies-suddenly/DWJT3532ORACBPHFME35UL6I2Y/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/seattle-firefighter-dies-suddenly/DWJT3532ORACBPHFME35UL6I2Y/</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A Seattle firefighter died suddenly before his shift, according to the Seattle Fire Department.</p> <p>Matt Runte, a firefighter and EMT, passed away Wednesday morning.</p> <p>In a statement from Seattle Fire, “We are heartbroken by this tragedy and are all grieving the loss of our friend and colleague.”</p> <p>Runte won the 2015 Seattle Firefighter of the Year.</p> <p>While receiving the award, Runte thanked his wife, daughter and parents.</p> <p>“I want to thank my wife, for always being there. My daughter, for being my biggest cheerleader. My parents, my father-in-law, and my crew of amazing people,” Runte said on a video produced by the Seattle Fire Department in 2016.</p> <p>At this time, there is no cause of death.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Military orders study: nuclear weapons role</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/09/pentagon-orders-study-into-future-of-icbms-amid-nuclear-posture-debate">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/09/pentagon-orders-study-into-future-of-icbms-amid-nuclear-posture-debate</a>
GIST	<p>The Pentagon has asked a Washington thinktank to draw up a report on the future of the US intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) programme and deliver it before the end of January.</p> <p>The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) will present options based on three rounds of virtual consultations, which began on Tuesday, between Pentagon officials, nuclear weapons experts and arms control advocates.</p> <p>Critics say the Carnegie Endowment consultations and its final report fall far short of an independent assessment that some congressional Democrats had demanded, scrutinising the main options: extending the life of the current ICBM, the Minuteman III, for a few years; or developing a totally new \$100bn missile, known as the <a href="#">Ground Based Strategic Deterrent</a> (GBSD).</p> <p>“As one of the individuals who was invited to be part of the first virtual consultation that CEIP organised yesterday [the first of three], I can say quite assuredly, that it’s not a substitute for the independent cost evaluation comparing the Minuteman III extension and the GBSD program,” said Daryl Kimball, the executive director of the Arms Control Association.</p> <p>Arms control advocates fear that Biden will not keep his pledge to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US defence planning, and that the president will be boxed in by a set of options drawn up by nuclear hawks in the Pentagon in the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR).</p> <p>The role of the CEIP was laid out in a letter from Colin Kahl, the undersecretary of defence for policy, to the Democratic senator Ed Markey, and a series of Pentagon responses to Markey’s follow-up questions about the NPR.</p>

“The department has ... tasked the Carnegie Endowment to conduct an external study of diverse views on the intercontinental ballistic missile leg of the nuclear triad to inform the NPR,” Markey was told.

However, by the time the Carnegie Endowment delivers its report, in late January, the NPR is due to be delivered to the White House, raising questions on whether its findings will have any influence on decisions about the future nuclear arsenal.

In the first Carnegie session, some of the participants asked Pentagon officials what the point of the exercise was, if its conclusions would come too late to influence the posture review.

“Their response was: ‘Well, we promised we would reach out to a number of constituencies, different people with different views’,” one participant said. “And so it is a box-ticking exercise with no particular influence.”

Commenting on the administration’s approach to drafting its nuclear weapons policy, Senator Markey said: “I’m pleased that the Biden administration says it is committed to listening to voices outside of the nuclear weapons confederacy that advocate an unnecessary and wasteful \$1.2tn in upgrades.

“But the proof will be in the pudding whether the Pentagon gives the president options to boldly reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our defence strategy – or if it defies the president’s guidance.”

James Acton, the co-director of the CEIP’s nuclear policy programme, said the project was not intended as a substitute for a thorough study, based on classified data, of the cost and feasibility of a Minuteman III life extension.

“What we are doing is to tee up options and identify critical questions for further study, and to do that we are trying to engage a genuinely wide range of expertise,” Acton said. “We would not have agreed to do this study if we had believed it was not a genuinely useful piece of work.”

One of the controversies plaguing the Pentagon’s drafting of the NPR was the abrupt removal in September of the woman in charge of the process, [Lemonor Tomero](#), who had raised questions about the cost of the GBSD programme, raising the ire of senior Republicans in Congress.

The Pentagon insisted that her job had been eliminated as part of a bureaucratic reorganisation and that she would be given another role. The assistant secretary of defence Mara Karlin assured Markey that Tomero had not been dismissed. However, Tomero has not been offered another job in the administration, according to her friends.

“Lemonor Tomero was fired and is now being blackballed because those of us on the outside are complaining,” said Jeffrey Lewis, a professor at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. “What’s the point of working with the Democrats when they fire anyone who doesn’t please the Republicans? Unless congressional Democrats come to life, Biden’s nuclear posture review is going to look exactly like Trump’s.”

A defence department spokesman said the Pentagon had nothing to add to its previous account of Tomero’s departure.

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HEADLINE	12/09 West Darfur tribal fighting: thousands flee
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/10/dozens-die-and-thousands-flee-in-west-darfur-tribal-fighting">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/10/dozens-die-and-thousands-flee-in-west-darfur-tribal-fighting</a>
GIST	Tribal fighting has killed dozens of people over the past three weeks in three separate areas of Sudan’s West <a href="#">Darfur</a> region and thousands of people have fled the violence, local medics have said.

The West Darfur Doctors Committee said in statements on Wednesday and Thursday that attacks in the Kreinik area killed 88 and wounded 84, while renewed violence in the Jebel Moon area killed 25 and wounded four. Meanwhile, violence in the Sarba locality killed eight and wounded six.

“They have created a wave of displacement from the outskirts into the town, with a humanitarian situation that can be described at the very least as catastrophic,” the committee said in a statement late on Wednesday, referring to Kreinik.

One resident said a camp of displaced people had been flattened and thousands of people had sought refuge in government buildings.

“The area is completely destroyed,” the resident said.

In the rugged Jebel Moon mountains of West Darfur, violence first broke out on 17 November between armed Arab camel herders.

Separate clashes erupted on Saturday in the Krink region of West Darfur between rival groups using automatic weapons.

“Many of the wounded died because they could not reach medical facilities, and community clinics in rural areas are not equipped,” the doctors’ union in West Darfur said on Thursday.

It said 106 people had been wounded.

Analysts say a peace deal signed by some rebel groups in October 2020 was one cause of unrest as local groups jostled for power.

A joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission stopped patrolling in January.

Humanitarian groups said there had been a rise in conflict across the wider Darfur region recently.

The Coordinating Committee for Refugee and Displacement Camps, a local NGO, said on Wednesday there was renewed violence in the Jebel Moon area, where aid workers reported 43 people killed and 10,000 displaced in violence in November.

The Zamzam refugee camp was being encircled by militias on Wednesday and the Donki Shata area of North Darfur was also attacked, the committee said on Wednesday.

According to the United Nations, the fighting has displaced more than 22,000 people, with 2,000 fleeing across the border into Chad.

Darfur has been ruled by emergency orders from Khartoum since 2003 when it was ravaged by civil war that erupted between ethnic minority rebels, who complained of discrimination, and the Arab-dominated government of then president Omar al-Bashir.

Khartoum responded by unleashing [the Janjaweed militias](#), blamed for atrocities including mass killings, rape, and the looting and burning of villages.

The violence resulted in one of the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophes. The UN estimates more than [350,000 people have been killed and at least 2 million](#) displaced by conflict in the region.

Aid groups and Darfur residents complain that the militias continue to carry out attacks on villages and camps. About 430,000 people have been displaced over the past year, a four-fold increase over 2020, aid groups say.

	“National authorities and the international community must urgently deal with the bloody reality of this spiralling violence,” Will Carter of the Norwegian Refugee Council said in a statement on Wednesday.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Big rise life insurance payouts in a century</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-spurs-biggest-rise-in-life-insurance-payouts-in-a-century-11639045802?mod=hp_list_pos1">https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-spurs-biggest-rise-in-life-insurance-payouts-in-a-century-11639045802?mod=hp_list_pos1</a>
GIST	<p>The Covid-19 pandemic last year drove the biggest increase in death benefits paid by U.S. life insurers since the 1918 influenza epidemic, an industry trade group said.</p> <p>Death-benefit payments rose 15.4% in 2020 to \$90.43 billion, mostly due to the pandemic, according to the American Council of Life Insurers. In 1918, payments surged 41%.</p> <p>The hit to the insurance industry was less than expected early in the pandemic because <a href="#">many of the victims were older people</a> who typically have smaller policies. The industry paid out \$78.36 billion in 2019, and payouts have typically increased modestly each year.</p> <p>Covid-19 also spurred the fastest rise in sales of insurance policies in 25 years, an industry research group said. Combined with good returns on some of insurers’ investments, industry assets increased 7.7% to \$8.2 trillion in 2020, the ACLI’s figures show.</p> <p>Don E. Lippencott, a longtime agent for New York Life Insurance Co. on Long Island, said he aims to deliver death-benefit checks in person to clients. He couldn’t do that during the pandemic.</p> <p>“It was gut wrenching and excruciating,” Mr. Lippencott said. Twenty-three of his clients died in 2020, roughly double the 10 to 12 deaths he has experienced in other years, with 10 of the deaths tied to Covid-19.</p> <p>The majority were in their 80s and 90s, and payouts ranged from \$50,000 to \$3 million, he said.</p> <p>“You just sit here and cry,” he said of clients he had known for decades. In ordinary times, part of an agent’s role is “being there with these families,” but lockdown restrictions precluded that. “We couldn’t be there, we couldn’t go to funerals, we couldn’t deliver the checks in person,” he said.</p> <p>It is unclear how many of the 385,343 deaths identified in 2020 by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as Covid-19 related were people who owned life insurance.</p> <p>Last summer, some publicly traded life insurers reduced estimates of their exposure, as measured by payouts per 100,000 U.S. Covid-19 fatalities. This was because deaths were heavily concentrated among older people, who tend to have smaller policies than people still in the workforce, if they have coverage at all.</p> <p>Working people often are covered under life-insurance programs offered as an employee benefit, and some buy individual policies as well to help cover their families’ expenses in the event of a premature death.</p> <p>The arrival of the <a href="#">Delta variant changed the dynamics</a> somewhat, CDC figures show. While approximately 80% of Covid-related deaths in 2020 occurred among those 65 and older, this year 69% of deaths have been in the 65-and-older group, and 25% were 45 to 64.</p> <p>Last month, the number of U.S. Covid-19 deaths recorded in 2021 <a href="#">surpassed the toll in 2020</a>, according to federal data and Johns Hopkins University, bringing the total number of reported deaths to more than 770,800.</p> <p>In the 1918 flu pandemic, the number of U.S. deaths reached about 675,000, with mortality high in people younger than 5 years old, 20-40 years old, and 65 years and older, according to the CDC’s website.</p>

	<p>The ACLI's data show two other years, both in the 1920s, when year-over-year increases topped 15%, when there also were influenza epidemics, said Andrew Melnyk, the ACLI's vice president of research and chief economist.</p> <p>The current pandemic has been accompanied by <a href="#">robust sales of both life and annuity products</a>, among other factors helping the industry weather the turmoil, according to ratings firm A.M. Best Co. in a report this week. Best said it had revised its outlook for the industry to "stable" from "negative."</p> <p>Industrywide, total new life-insurance premiums increased 18% for the first nine months of 2021, the largest growth recorded for nine months in 25 years, according to industry-funded research firm Limra.</p> <p>The constant news about Covid-19 deaths "is not as visceral of a realization as it was last year, but people still have that thought of family members and close friends they lost," said Collis Temple, a national sales director at <a href="#">Primerica</a> Inc. So there remains motivation to buy life insurance that didn't exist before the pandemic.</p> <p>Primerica's death claims for 2020 increased 15.8% to \$1.7 billion compared with 2019, some of which the company attributes to Covid. Total face amount of policies issued increased 16% compared with 2019, while sales in this year's third quarter "started to normalize toward pre-pandemic levels," it said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Asian giant hornet season wraps up</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3274850/asian-giant-hornet-season-wraps-up/">https://mynorthwest.com/3274850/asian-giant-hornet-season-wraps-up/</a>
GIST	<p>In snowy Whatcom County, scientists from the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) are busy picking up the last of the Asian giant hornet traps before the hornets' winter hibernation.</p> <p>Public Engagement Specialist Karla Salp told KIRO Radio that it was a successful year, with three giant hornet nests discovered and eradicated in August and September near Blaine.</p> <p>In the three months since the third eradication, the hornets have stayed fairly quiet.</p> <p>"Since that last nest was eradicated, we have not detected any further Asian giant hornets in Washington this year," Salp said.</p> <p>That has the WSDA cautiously hopeful, though Salp said it is far too early to declare victory over the hornets. State entomologist Sven Spichiger said earlier this year that the state would need to go years without a sighting to call the hornets eradicated.</p> <p>"It's definitely encouraging that we've not had any additional catches, but it's way too early at this point to say whether that means we got them all, or whether they could pop up again next year or the year after," Salp said.</p> <p>There is another reason to be optimistic: Unlike last year's nest, which was eradicated in late October and contained about 200 virgin queens — the hornets that fly off and create new nests — the three nests eradicated this year were gone before they produced any queens.</p> <p>"This year, we eradicated those three nests long before they produced any virgin queens that could emerge, mate, and go off to start new nests," Salp said. "So we're fairly confident there will be no new nests from the ones that we did eradicate."</p> <p>Still, the assumption is that there are still hornets out there, so trapping season will begin anew next summer. WSDA entomologists are considering using drones to watch for hornets, especially in areas that are hard to walk through due to blackberry brambles.</p>



	<p>People who want to take part in the effort are asked to be on the lookout for queens in the spring, and to put up their own hornet traps <a href="#">at the beginning of July</a> as the males start to emerge. People can then report their findings each week, reporting anything suspicious to WSDA. To learn how to make your own trap, visit <a href="#">WSDA's website</a>.</p> <p>The citizen scientist effort was no small part of this year's fight against the hornets. Salp said two of the three nests this year were found based off homeowners' reports.</p> <p>"That's really encouraging to see, just kind of the whole community that's built up around this effort. ... If we are successful, it's as much a credit to the community as it will be to WSDA," Salp said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Amtrak: vaccine rules force service cuts</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2021/12/09/amtrak-vaccine-mandate-service-cuts/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2021/12/09/amtrak-vaccine-mandate-service-cuts/</a>
GIST	<p>An Amtrak executive told Congress on Thursday the railroad doesn't expect to have enough people to operate all of its trains next month, when a federal coronavirus vaccination mandate takes effect.</p> <p>Amtrak President Stephen Gardner said about 5 percent of its workforce has yet to get vaccinated less than four weeks before the Jan. 4 deadline.</p> <p>"We anticipate proactively needing to temporarily reduce some train frequencies across our network in January to avoid staffing-related cancellations — with our plan to fully restore all frequencies by March, or as soon as we have qualified employees available," Gardner said at a hearing of the House transportation subcommittee on railroads, pipelines and hazardous materials.</p> <p>Amtrak last month warned it would send letters to uncompliant workers starting Dec. 8 in preparation for termination Jan. 4. The railroad is expected to publish a revised service schedule next week to reflect the cuts. Gardner said the carrier is still determining what trips will be removed, adding that the railroad wants to give passengers enough time to rebook trips.</p> <p>Many onboard personnel, including engineers and conductors, retired or left Amtrak during the pandemic, leaving the company stretched thin and unable to resume normal operations. Amtrak is operating about 80 percent of its pre-pandemic schedules and needs to hire more people to add trains.</p> <p>Gardner said reductions will be largely felt on the system's long-distance routes. He said a high percentage of unvaccinated employees are at stations where routes have "relatively small crew bases at intermediate points along multiday long-distance routes."</p> <p>Thursday's hearing focused on the landmark infrastructure bill that puts \$66 billion into rail to expand intercity service. The hearing came days after it became public that the company might reduce service when it enforces a federal vaccination mandate that applies to federal contractors. House committee members were mum on the potential service reductions.</p> <p>Gardner said the company is committed to expanding passenger rail to other cities and playing a larger role in national goals of easing congestion and air pollution.</p> <p>The carrier is also working to lure new passengers and bring back previous riders. Amtrak ridership has recovered to about 70 percent of pre-pandemic levels, Gardner said.</p> <p>"It is going to take several years," he said. "A lot of it depends on the pandemic. A lot of it depends on business travel. We are working hard to grow there."</p> <p>Subcommittee Chairman Donald M. Payne Jr. (D-N.J.) called the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure law a "once-in-a-generation investment" that will help kick-start more intercity passenger train service and improve safety, efficiency and reliability of the nation's rail networks.</p>

“In the next few years, I expect we will see new and improved accessible stations, rolling stock and associated maintenance facilities,” Payne said.

The infrastructure package puts \$66 billion into rail. It could power the biggest expansion in Amtrak’s 50-year history.

Also Thursday, Amtrak’s inspector general issued a report citing deficiencies in the railroad’s human resources department, including significant vacancies it said are likely to affect Amtrak’s “ability to find and hire qualified candidates in time to meet the company’s hiring needs.”

Amtrak is projecting to add between 2,500 and 3,500 workers this fiscal year as it restores service that was canceled during the pandemic and moves forward on major capital projects aided by the infrastructure bill, according to the inspector general report. That would represent about a 20 percent increase in workforce levels by the end of October.

The infrastructure law also increased Amtrak’s need to fill leadership positions to carry out high-priority capital projects, the report concluded. Amtrak is hiring senior project managers for four of its largest capital programs, including the \$4 billion replacement of the Baltimore and Potomac Tunnel and the Gateway program, which includes various projects in the New York area.

The report noted that rebuilding the workforce could be difficult at a time when 28 of the 64 positions within its recruitment team are unfilled.

“Human Resources employees are taking on workloads that are on average double the industry standard, leading to burnout, causing hiring delays, and diverting managers’ attention from more strategic priorities,” the report said.

In response to the report, Amtrak said it has a plan to fill vacant positions and is prioritizing filling jobs needed to restore train operations.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Sawant pulls ahead; likely to keep job</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://crosscut.com/politics/2021/12/sawant-pulls-ahead-seattle-recall-election-vote-tally-nears-end">https://crosscut.com/politics/2021/12/sawant-pulls-ahead-seattle-recall-election-vote-tally-nears-end</a>
GIST	<p>With nearly all the votes counted in the recall election to unseat Kshama Sawant, the Seattle City Council member pulled ahead Thursday and is looking more likely to keep her job.</p> <p>About 49.1% of voters in Seattle City Council District 3 approved the recall, with 50.3% rejecting the move, thereby retaining Sawant – a difference of 232 votes. King County Elections reported that 591 signatures have been challenged and have yet to be counted.</p> <p>Seattle voters have had a history of swinging left in later returns, which in the past has pulled Sawant to the top after being behind in initial returns. If this vote trend holds, which appears to have been the case again, the woman who sits on the far left of the council will likely continue her council term, which is next up for a vote in 2023.</p> <p>In 2013, Sawant trailed longtime incumbent Councilmember Richard Conlin by 7 percentage points in a citywide race on election night, only <a href="#">to pull ahead as later votes</a> were counted. The socialist <a href="#">won reelection to her seat in 2015</a> after the city switched to district-based city council seats. But in 2019, Sawant trailed challenger Egan Orion, organizer of Seattle PrideFest, by 8 percentage points, only to beat him by 4 percentage points and 2,000 votes when all the votes were counted.</p> <p>At Sawant’s election night event on Tuesday, the seven-year council member steeled her supporters for a possible defeat.</p>



“We have proudly and powerfully fought back in a way that should be an example to all working people, regardless of ultimately whether we win or lose,” she said. “The working class will have setbacks ... even if we do everything right, even if we fight with every ounce of courage, because this bankrupt system is stacked up against us. We do know, however, we do know, if we don’t fight we will never win.”

But the mood at the end of the evening was optimistic, as the recall attempt ended up ahead by 2,000 votes.

“Still winnable!” one supporter cheered.

Sawant’s runs for city council have gained national attention from all over the political spectrum ever since her first challenge to Conlin, as Sawant aimed to be the first Socialist to sit on the Seattle City Council in over a century. Now, she is the longest-serving Seattle city council member.

Sawant has become a symbol on the left for progressive causes and a target from the right for many of the same reasons. She has pushed for the \$15 minimum wage, protections for renters, defunding the police and a city tax on Amazon and other large corporations.

During her election night event, Sawant said other progressives who ran in Seattle in November fell short because they did not embrace these causes strongly enough.

But rather than criticizing her politics, the Recall Sawant campaign accused the council member of wrongdoing. Recall supporters said she broke her oath of office by using city funds to push for a potential 2020 ballot measure on a new Seattle tax for large corporations. They also accused her of violating outgoing Mayor Jenny Durkan’s privacy by taking part in a protest at the mayor’s house and of opening City Hall to protesters when the building was closed during the pandemic.

The Kshama Solidarity Campaign, which has campaigned in support of retaining Sawant, told Crosscut earlier this year that the recall campaign is part of “a nationwide right-wing backlash against Black Lives Matter” and other progressive causes.

Both the recall and her supporters poured nearly \$1 million on each side for the Dec. 7 recall election. District 3, which includes Capitol Hill, the Central District, Madison Park, Madrona, Yesler Terrace and parts of Little Saigon, Beacon Hill and South Lake Union, has 77,000 voters.

On election night, Sawant reminded her supporters of the symbolic importance of retaining her in office to embolden other progressives worldwide.

“If a small revolutionary socialist organization in Seattle can beat the richest guys in the world, again and again, you can be sure that all the organized power of the wider working class can and will change society,” Sawant said.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 NYC: noncitizens to vote in local elections</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/nyregion/noncitizens-voting-rights-nyc.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/nyregion/noncitizens-voting-rights-nyc.html</a>
GIST	<p>New York City became the largest city in the country to <a href="#">allow noncitizens to vote in local elections</a> after the City Council on Thursday overwhelmingly approved legislation granting the right to more than 800,000 legal residents.</p> <p>The move places New York City at the forefront of the debate over voting rights, serving as a stark contrast to some states that have moved to add voting restrictions, including explicitly barring noncitizens from voting.</p>

The legislation was approved over the objections of Mayor Bill de Blasio, who questioned whether the City Council has the power to grant voting rights to noncitizens. Legal experts expect that the bill could face a legal challenge.

Noncitizens would be able to begin to register to vote a year from now. They could begin voting in local elections as of Jan. 9, 2023, according to the City Council.

The legislation affects those with green cards or the right to work in the United States; it does not entitle them to vote in state or federal elections. Councilman Ydanis Rodriguez, the bill's primary sponsor, said the law will give more people who live in New York City and pay taxes there a say in how the city is run.

"People who are looking to get elected to office will now have to spend the same amount of time in the communities affected by this legislation as they do in upper-class neighborhoods," Mr. Rodriguez said in an interview.

Opponents of the bill say that it will usurp power from citizens and will discourage legal residents from pursuing U.S. citizenship.

In Colorado, Florida and Alabama, voters approved ballot measures last year that stipulated that only U.S. citizens can vote. North Dakota and Arizona already formally bar noncitizens from voting.

[Americans for Citizen Voting](#), an organization that was founded in 2019 to oppose efforts to allow noncitizens to vote, sent a letter to the New York City Council this week urging council members to reject the bill.

"We felt we needed to get involved because this is a growing movement across the country," said the organization's president, Christopher Arps. "We are not against immigrants — we believe immigrants have built this country. We just feel people should become citizens before they're allowed to vote."

Mr. de Blasio has said he would not veto the bill. The bill automatically becomes law if it is not signed in 30 days.

The mayor contended that noncitizen voting is a right that the state would have to grant, a position that many experts disagree with.

Towns in Vermont and Maryland already allow noncitizens to vote in municipal elections. Noncitizens in San Francisco can vote in school board elections and several municipalities in Illinois, Maine and Massachusetts are also considering allowing noncitizen voting.

In New York, the mayor-elect, Eric Adams, has said he supports the rights of green card holders to vote in local elections and has urged passage of the legislation. But he, too, has questioned whether the City Council has the ability to grant voting rights to noncitizens. A spokesman for Mr. Adams said he would review the legislation when he takes office.

Experts say that the New York State Constitution grants voting rights to citizens but does not explicitly prevent noncitizen voting. Noncitizens were allowed to vote in New York City school board elections until the boards were abolished in the early 2000s.

There was an effort to stop the legislation from being approved Thursday when Mark Gjonaj, a councilman from the Bronx, introduced a motion to send the bill back to committee. Mr. Gjonaj said he believed there should be a residency requirement of a year, instead of the bill's 30-day requirement.

People with 30 days of residency are "transient," not a "permanent resident" and not a "contributor," said Mr. Gjonaj, who noted no on the bill.

According to the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, of the estimated 808,000 adult New Yorkers who are lawful permanent residents, or green card holders, or have work authorization, 130,000 are from the Dominican Republic and 117,500 are from China.

Laurie Cumbo, a councilwoman from Brooklyn, questioned whether the bill would dilute the voting power of African Americans. "This particular legislation is going to shift the power dynamics in New York City in a major way," said Ms. Cumbo, who voted no.

Tiffany Cabán, an incoming councilwoman from Queens, called Ms. Cumbo's argument "divisive."

"Expanding the right to vote for some folks does not in any way diminish or tarnish the right to vote for others," she said.

The motion to send the bill back to committee failed after a spirited debate on the floor of the City Council; the Council speaker, Corey Johnson, said that any amendments to the bill would render it "technically dead" because there would not be enough time to vote on the bill during this Council session. The legislation passed by a vote of 33 to 14 with two abstentions.

Under the legislation, the New York City Board of Elections, which has faced scrutiny about its handling of elections, would issue a separate voter registration form and provide ballots for noncitizens that only include municipal offices.

Eva Santos, 32, who immigrated to the Bronx from the Dominican Republic at 9 years old and is allowed to live and work in the country through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program known as DACA, said she felt a sense of relief and peace of mind when the legislation passed.

"I think it's a big step toward showing other localities that we have the right to be represented, and that we have contributed enough to be represented and have a voice," Ms. Santos said. "We are New Yorkers like anyone else."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Mexico migrant truck crashes; 53 killed</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/world/americas/mexico-migrants-killed-accident.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/world/americas/mexico-migrants-killed-accident.html</a>
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY — At least 53 people were killed and dozens injured in a horrific truck accident in southern Mexico on Thursday, the authorities said, with most of the victims believed to be migrants coming from Central America.</p> <p>The accident, which took place in southern Chiapas state, occurred when a truck carrying more than 100 people overturned on Thursday afternoon near Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital, the head of the state Civil Protection Service, Luis Manuel García Moreno, told Milenio TV.</p> <p>The accident is one of the deadliest involving migrants in decades, and follows the death of 13 migrants in a car accident on the U.S. border in March.</p> <p>Mr. García said that, based on witness testimony, the truck was traveling at excessive speed and then flipped over while rounding a sharp curve, with the trailer carrying the migrants then crashing into a pedestrian bridge and construction nearby.</p> <p>Images and videos shared on social media showed more than a dozen bodies laid out on the road covered in white sheets near what appeared to be the twisted remains of an overturned vehicle.</p> <p>The Civil Protection Service said on Facebook that another 58 people had been injured. The accident occurred on the highway between the town of Chiapa de Corzo and the state capital.</p>

“My solidarity with the victims of the traffic accident,” the state’s governor, Rutilio Escandón, said on Twitter. “I have given instructions to provide prompt attention and assistance to the injured. Responsibility will be determined according to the law.”

Bordering Guatemala, the state of Chiapas has in recent years seen a surge of migrants from Central America, many of them being smuggled through Mexico on their way to the United States border. A record 1.7 million migrants, mainly from Mexico and Central America, were found trying to enter the United States illegally in the 12 months leading up to October this year.

Attempting to reach the United States, whether to seek asylum or to search for economic opportunities, is a dangerous and at times deadly process, with migrants having to travel through cartel-infested territory in northern Mexico, often paying steep prices to smugglers to get them to the border.

Migrants are regularly packed into trucks or cars as they make the journey north, and frequently fall prey to violence along the way. In January, the bodies of 19 people, most of them migrants, were found in a charred pickup truck near the U.S. border. A group of 12 police officers were later arrested in connection with the crime.

At least 3,575 deaths have been documented on the United States-Mexico border since 2014, according to the International Organization for Migration, with 650 people killed attempting to cross the U.S. border this year alone — the highest number since the I.O.M. began documenting deaths in 2014.

“The rising migrant death toll in the region is highly alarming,” said Michele Klein-Solomon, I.O.M. regional director for Central, North America and the Caribbean, in a statement on Wednesday.

At least 750 migrants have been killed trying to cross Mexico since 2014, according to the I.O.M., and thousands more have simply disappeared.

Thursday’s accident comes just a day after the United States relaunched a contentious migrant enforcement program known as Remain in Mexico, which would force asylum seekers to wait across the border while their cases are determined in U.S. courts. The program has been criticized by human rights groups because of the unsafe conditions migrants face in Mexico.

“Under the Remain in Mexico program, the United States and Mexico have knowingly put thousands of asylum seekers’ lives in danger,” Ari Sawyer, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, said in a statement Thursday.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Michigan school shooting \$100M lawsuit</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/us/michigan-school-shooting-lawsuits-oxford.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/us/michigan-school-shooting-lawsuits-oxford.html</a>
GIST	<p>The parents of two sisters who survived the Nov. 30 shooting at Oxford High School in suburban Detroit filed a federal lawsuit on Thursday against the school district and its officials, including the superintendent, principal, dean of students, two guidance counselors and two teachers.</p> <p>The plaintiffs are Jeffrey and Brandi Franz, parents of Riley, a 17-year-old senior, and Bella, a 14-year-old freshman. Riley was shot in the neck in front of her sister.</p> <p>The lawsuit, filed in federal court, seeks \$100 million in damages. It claims constitutional violations under the 14th Amendment and violations under Michigan state law because the teenagers “had a clearly established right to be free from danger.” The lawsuit also states that school staff members acted in “reckless disregard” for the victims’ safety.</p> <p>A second suit will be filed in state court, said the parents’ lawyer, Geoffrey Fieger. Mr. Fieger represented survivors of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting and has <a href="#">represented victims</a> of the Flint water crisis.</p>

Four students were killed and several others were seriously injured in the Oxford shooting. Ethan Crumbley, 15, was [charged with murder and terrorism](#). His parents, Jennifer and James Crumbley, were [charged with involuntary manslaughter](#) because the prosecutor said they should have known that their son was a danger to his school after buying him a gun. All have pleaded not guilty.

The actions of the school district, Oxford Community Schools, have also been [under a microscope](#). At a news conference last week, the Oakland County prosecutor, Karen D. McDonald, outlined a chilling sequence of events that led to the shooting.

The day before the shooting, a teacher found Ethan Crumbley searching for ammunition on his phone. The school was aware, Ms. McDonald said, that he had recently visited a shooting range with his mother. And on the morning of the shooting, a teacher discovered an alarming drawing from Mr. Crumbley that included a gun, a person who had been shot and the words “The thoughts won’t stop. Help me.”

Mr. Crumbley’s parents were called to an immediate meeting at the school with their son. They were told to put him into counseling within 48 hours or risk being reported to Children’s Protective Services. They refused to take him home when asked to do so, according to the prosecutor.

[The school district has said](#) that staff members chose to return Mr. Crumbley to class following that meeting, after observing him behave normally in the guidance office. Mr. Crumbley’s belongings were not searched for a weapon, and later that day, he began shooting after emerging from a bathroom, according to authorities.

The lawsuit filed on Thursday says that “Ethan Crumbley posted countdowns and threats of bodily harm” on social media, and that parents complained to administrators about such social media messages in the weeks before the shooting, but that the superintendent, Tim Throne, and principal, Steven Wolf, said the threats were not credible.

The suit also states that school officials did not involve the school safety officer in the meeting with Mr. Crumbley and his parents on the day of the shooting. The complaint claims that the principal and dean of students were in the meeting with the Crumbley family, while the district has said that the incidents before the shooting “remained at the guidance counselor level.”

In its defense, the school [said in an earlier statement](#) that Ethan Crumbley was returned to the classroom because he “had no prior disciplinary infractions,” adding that the counselors “made a judgment based on their professional training and clinical experience and did not have all the facts we now know.”

In an interview with The New York Times, Mr. Fieger said that he simply did not believe the district’s version of events, and that his lawsuit would force it to provide documentation under subpoena.

“They are being coy,” he said.

According to Mr. Fieger, Riley Franz was shot after emerging from a bathroom with Bella and a friend. The friend was one of the two girls who were shot and killed.

Riley was hospitalized and is now recuperating at home with a neck wound but no other major physical impairments, he said.

Years of civil litigation often follow school shootings. But administrators, teachers and counselors rarely have to fear criminal charges, [according to legal experts](#) — even when there was some kind of advance warning of potential violence.

In the interview, Mr. Fieger said he hoped that expensive lawsuits would force a national conversation about gun control.

	“We’re the weirdest society in the world,” he said. “If we started to make it costly, we’d make a cost-benefit analysis between this so-called right to bear arms and the cost of slaughter in our schools.”
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Pandemic ‘forgotten griever’s’: children</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/us/politics/children-lost-parents-caregivers-covid-grief.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/us/politics/children-lost-parents-caregivers-covid-grief.html</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Courtney Grund, whose husband died of <a href="#">Covid-19</a> in August, got an alarming text message last week: Her 16-year-old son was “talking about self-harm,” according to the message, sent by his friend. She quickly signed him up for grief counseling, she said in a tearful interview, using her maiden name to protect his privacy.</p> <p>John Jackson, a disabled veteran on a fixed income, said he had struggled to find help for his 14-year-old daughter, whose mother died in the pandemic. “I can see it in her, where she’s suffering,” he said.</p> <p>Pamela Addison, a reading teacher whose husband died, said she felt fortunate that she could afford therapy — \$200 a session out of pocket — for her grieving 3-year-old.</p> <p>Although Congress has allocated trillions of dollars to combat the pandemic, including more than \$100 million for existing children’s mental health programs and \$122 billion for schools, the Biden administration and lawmakers have not yet created initiatives specifically for the tens of <a href="#">thousands of children who have lost parents and primary caregivers to Covid-19</a>.</p> <p>Behind the scenes, leaders of a bipartisan coalition of experts in education, the economy and health — backed by wealthy philanthropies and headed by two former governors, Dirk Kempthorne of Idaho, a Republican, and Deval Patrick of Massachusetts, a Democrat — have been meeting with White House officials, urging them to do more.</p> <p>On Thursday — just two days after the <a href="#">surgeon general warned</a> that young people were facing “devastating” mental health issues related to the pandemic — that group, the <a href="#">Covid Collaborative</a>, will <a href="#">release a report</a> estimating that more than 167,000 children in the United States have lost parents or in-home caregivers to the disease.</p> <p>The collaborative is asking President Biden to initiate a national campaign to identify these children and, with help from the private sector, take steps to improve their emotional and economic well-being. Its recommendations include offering them mental health care and creating a “Covid Bereaved Children’s Fund,” similar to a fund established after the Sept. 11 attacks, to provide up to \$10,000 to families in need.</p> <p>“The president is uniquely positioned to put an official imprimatur on the call in this report to coordinate all resources, public and private, at every level of government and every level of the private sector and philanthropy to help these children,” Mr. Patrick said in an interview.</p> <p>“It’s a tragedy not of their making,” he added, “but they’re our kids. They belong to us, and all we are saying is, ‘Let’s act like it.’”</p> <p>The report, titled “Hidden Pain,” estimates that more than 70 percent of the bereaved children are 13 or younger. It is based on federal data and a modeling study led by Dan Treglia, a social policy researcher at the University of Pennsylvania.</p> <p>Communities of color are disproportionately affected. Dr. Treglia, who is also part of the collaborative, said racial and ethnic disparities in caregiver loss from Covid-19 exceeded the already stark disparities in coronavirus deaths.</p> <p>Parents and young people left behind said the push by the Covid Collaborative was welcome news, if only to force officials in Washington to recognize this new cohort of bereaved children.</p>



Ms. Grund picked up her son from school last week after she got the text from his friend; he has not yet returned.

He went to his first group therapy session Tuesday evening. In an interview, he said he was having mood swings and suicidal thoughts, and had not wanted to leave his room. He would like to see initiatives that better equip teachers and school officials to help grieving students.

“No one knew how to deal with what I was going through, so it was hard for the teachers to communicate to me,” he said, adding that while he could talk to his friends, it had not helped much. “I can share with them, but it’s in one ear and out the other,” he said. “They don’t completely understand and, like, process the whole situation.”

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services, Kirsten Allen, said the administration “has made a number of investments and launched several initiatives covering a wide range of mental health priorities — including support for children who have lost parents.”

She cited the surgeon general’s advisory and the expansion of several existing programs. In May, for example, the [department announced](#) it was releasing \$14.2 million, allocated by Congress through the American Rescue Plan, to expand access to pediatric mental health care. The rescue plan also provided money for suicide prevention programs and a program to improve care and access to services for “traumatized children.”

John Bridgeland, the collaborative’s founder and chief executive officer, said expanding existing programs was not enough. “We need a focused effort to help the unbearable loss of these 167,000 children,” he said.

Losing a parent or a caregiver is hard for a child in ordinary times. But experts in grief counseling and school officials say the pandemic has exacted a particular toll.

“The death of a parent is something that we deal with all the time — not just with Covid,” said Susan Gezon Morgan, a school nurse in Emmett, Idaho, a small city outside Boise. “But I think the fact that Covid is in the news and so sudden, and oftentimes it’s a young parent, that it seems so much more traumatizing.”

In a small community like Emmett, where everyone knows everyone else, Ms. Morgan said, the grief cuts both ways. Grieving children lose their privacy, but they also have a tight-knit community to provide support. In big cities, it is another story.

Mr. Jackson, of Reisterstown, Md., just outside Baltimore, is home-schooling his daughter, Akeerah, in part because he fears her peers will be insensitive, encouraging her to “just get over” her loss.

When Akeerah’s mother, Cathy Fulcher, died, Mr. Jackson got a note from the Baltimore County school system saying she could delay turning in her grades, but little in the way of guidance. Soon afterward, he said, he started looking for a place for his daughter to get therapy.

“One was \$250; they didn’t take any type of insurance,” he said. “That was just for us to come in for an evaluation. That’s just not in the budget.”

Eventually he found [Roberta’s House](#), a grief support center for Baltimore families. There, Akeerah said, she has learned how to cope with her grief by drawing and writing in a journal, and she is now a “peer ambassador,” leading sessions for other teens. She has also attended [Camp Erin](#), a free camp for grieving children offered in cities across the country.

Both are funded by the New York Life Foundation, which also backs the Covid Collaborative and has created a website, [grievingstudents.org](#), to provide information for educators as part of its “grief-

sensitive schools” initiative, which predates the pandemic. The vice president of the foundation, Maria Collins, says many of its programs have waiting lists.

“It’s known in this field that the young person is the forgotten griever,” she said, adding that the foundation was open to working with the federal government and would be “eager to provide tangible support, financial and otherwise, for Covid-bereaved children.”

The collaborative envisions \$2 billion to \$3 billion for the bereavement fund, possibly supplemented by money from private foundations. It would help parents struggling with everything from rent payments to their children’s academic performance to finding the right therapy at a reasonable cost.

The report builds on similar research: [The journal Pediatrics](#), relying on data through June 30, before the wave of infections caused by the Delta variant, reported in October that more than 120,000 American children had lost parents or caregivers from Covid-19.

The researchers who conducted the collaborative’s study found that Black and Hispanic children were roughly two and a half times as likely as whites to be bereaved as a result of the pandemic, while Native American children were nearly four times as likely. Dr. Treglia, whose research focuses on vulnerable populations, said the number of bereaved children grew quickly during the Delta surge in part because it hit so many adults of childbearing age.

“There is an extraordinary responsibility to care for those children,” he said. “So many of them were facing economic and other hardships even before the pandemic began, and certainly before they lost a caregiver. Now they are facing their darkest days.”

Some parents whose spouses were frontline workers say they would like at least some recognition from Washington that their loved ones died while trying to protect others.

Ms. Addison, whose husband was a hospital speech pathologist in Paterson, N.J., runs a support group called Young Widows and Widowers of Covid-19. She estimates that 95 percent of her 900 members have children.

“You invite athletes to the White House because they’ve won a championship; why not invite families who lost their loved one because they went into a hospital, they went into a school that wasn’t really safe?” she said. “You see when a military person dies there is this big celebration of their life and the kids know their parent is a hero. Our kids need that.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Airlines face holiday test: demand surges</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/9/airlines-face-holiday-test-as-demand-surges/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/9/airlines-face-holiday-test-as-demand-surges/</a>
GIST	<p>The airline industry’s recovery is being tested this holiday season as passengers return in near pre-pandemic numbers.</p> <p>The resurgence in air travel is being fueled by pent-up demand and the availability of vaccines, along with an apparent lull in virus cases since summer’s big wave. The Transportation Security Administration says that passenger checkpoints are nearly as busy now as they were in 2019, before the pandemic.</p> <p>Airlines have been ramping up capacity to meet this demand, but the industry is hampered by a lagging workforce recovery. They’re struggling to hire more staff, especially air crews. That’s raised concerns that major airlines could be in for a rough December.</p> <p>“Like a lot of industries, they are competing for people,” said Peter McNally, an analyst at Third Bridge. “They know what they have to do, it’s just a matter of going out and doing it.”</p>



Major airlines encouraged thousands of workers to quit last year when air travel collapsed during the pandemic. They were barred from laying off workers as a condition of federal pandemic relief. Those workers have not returned quickly enough, leaving the current workforce stretched. In many cases flight crews are reaching their limit of allowable hours, forcing flight cancellations because there aren't enough cabin crews.

American Airlines faced such a situation in late October when it had to cancel more than a thousand flights because it was short-staffed. Southwest Airlines also made headlines for flight cancellations in October. Both airlines cited weather problems, though analysts have said that any actual weather or air traffic issues have just made the root problem of staffing shortages worse.

"One of the problems the airlines had so far in their coverage was the unpredictable nature in booking," McNally said. "People are booking travel with less time between booking and travel and that makes staffing harder."

American Airlines' labor unions warned for months that the airline was scheduling more flights than its workforce could handle.

"These cases showed just how quickly weather and now staffing shortages can ripple through airlines just as they are seeking to maximize fall revenue within exceedingly slim operational margins," said airline industry data provider Cirium in a recent report.

American, Delta and United spent the first half of 2021 slowly recovering from the worst of the pandemic. Each airline saw modest improvements in available seat miles, a key measure of passenger capacity. That measure had nearly recovered to pre-pandemic levels by the third quarter.

The push to increase passenger capacity may have been too much for some airlines. Employment for air travel is still down more than 9% from peak levels just before the virus pandemic gutted the industry, according to Labor Department data. Staffing levels will likely have to keep increasing to help maintain flight capacity for a full revenue recovery.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Austria nationwide vaccine mandate, fines</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/9/austria-to-impose-nationwide-vaccine-mandate-fine/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/9/austria-to-impose-nationwide-vaccine-mandate-fine/</a>
GIST	<p>BERLIN — Austria plans to impose fines of up to 3,600 euros (around \$4,000) on people who flout a coronavirus vaccine mandate it aims to introduce in February for all residents age 14 and over, the health minister said Thursday.</p> <p>The government announced last month that it would implement a general vaccine mandate early next year, becoming the first European country to do so. It has drawn up details of the draft legislation in recent weeks, with backing from two of the three opposition parties in parliament.</p> <p>Health Minister Wolfgang Mueckstein said that there will be exemptions for pregnant women - though he stressed that vaccinations are recommended for them too - for people who can't get vaccinated for medical reasons, and for people who have recovered from COVID-19 in the previous six months.</p> <p>The legislation is due to take effect on Feb. 1. Mueckstein said that people who are eligible for exemptions will have to have those registered in a central vaccination register, which will be checked at regular three-month intervals. The first cutoff date will be March 15.</p> <p>For people who aren't vaccinated or exempted, the draft foresees proceedings being launched that could result in a 3,600-euro fine. People's income and other financial obligations will be taken into account in calculating fines. Alternatively, officials can opt to impose a fine of up to 600 euros (about \$680) in shortened proceedings.</p>

	<p>Authorities will write to unvaccinated people every three months reminding them to get their shots or get a doctor to certify their right to an exemption before the next cutoff date. If they continue not to comply, fines can be imposed every three months. Proceedings will be dropped if people produce proof of vaccination in the meantime.</p> <p>Around 68% of Austria's population of 8.9 million is vaccinated, a comparatively low rate for Western Europe. Neighboring Germany, where the rate is just over 69%, also is eyeing the introduction of a general vaccine mandate early next year, though plans have yet to be drawn up and officials say they will let lawmakers vote according to their conscience rather than along party lines.</p> <p>The announcement from Austria that it would introduce a general vaccine mandate came on Nov. 19 - at the same time the government decided to lock down the country to curb a surge of new infections. That lockdown is due to end on Sunday, though restrictions will remain for unvaccinated people.</p> <p>"We still have an obligation and a need to increase vaccination coverage so that we don't go from lockdown to lockdown, next year as well," said Karoline Edtstadler, the Cabinet minister responsible for constitutional issues.</p> <p>"There are still well over a million Austrians who aren't vaccinated. That is too many," she added. "I say very clearly that we don't want to punish the people who aren't vaccinated. We want to bring them along, we want to convince them of this vaccination and we want them to show solidarity with everyone so that we can regain our freedom."</p> <p>The country's seven-day infection rate has declined during the lockdown. It stood at 432.6 new cases per 100,000 residents on Thursday, down from more than 1,100 on the day the lockdown started.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 US support eastern Europe if Russia attack</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/09/eastern-europe-urges-nato-unity-in-biden-talks-with-russia">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/09/eastern-europe-urges-nato-unity-in-biden-talks-with-russia</a>
GIST	<p>Joe Biden has phoned the leaders of Ukraine and nine eastern European Nato states promising support if Russia attacks Ukraine and pledging to involve them in decisions about the region.</p> <p>After a 90-minute call with Biden late on Thursday, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy said on Twitter that the two "discussed possible formats for resolving the conflict" in eastern <a href="#">Ukraine</a>, where Russian-backed separatists have carved out a self-declared state.</p> <p>After Zelenskiy, Biden spent 40 minutes talking to the leaders of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, <a href="#">Lithuania</a>, Poland, Romania and Slovakia – all of which, unlike Ukraine, joined Nato in the wake of the 1991 Soviet collapse.</p> <p>Biden reassured the leaders that nothing would be agreed with <a href="#">Russia</a> about the region behind the backs of its countries, an adviser to Lithuania's president told reporters.</p> <p>"Biden said, 'nothing about you without you'", said Asta Skaisgiryte.</p> <p>The calls came amid mounting tensions over a Russian military buildup on Ukraine's borders – and unease among east-European states over US plans to hold talks with Moscow.</p> <p>Officials in <a href="#">Poland</a> and other eastern and central Nato countries have privately bristled at Biden's description of seeking an "accommodation" with Russia, worrying that any trade-off could increase the danger they face from an expansionist Russia.</p> <p>"Russia must not be given any say in how Nato organises the defence of its territory" or in who can join the military alliance, said the Estonian prime minister, Kaja Kallas, in public remarks on Thursday. "What</p>

is most alarming is Russia's desire to turn Europe into spheres of influence. It is unacceptable and morally indefensible, and Russia must be made aware of that in clear terms."

Eastern [Nato](#) members are expected to demand a seat at the table before Biden reveals more details about the talks on Friday.

"We have said many times that we must be included in anything that is discussed in our region; nothing should be discussed without us," said Linas Linkevičius, a former foreign minister and defence minister of Lithuania.

"The intentions of Russia are well-known, they were always trying to split, divide, marginalise, so that's nothing new ... we have to maintain unity and a principled decision, especially when we have this possible aggression against Ukraine."

Linkevičius, like others, noted that there was little public information about the talks available yet and said that many officials were probably waiting for more information from the Biden government before speaking publicly about them.

A diplomat from a Baltic state said there was concern that the talks being announced as Russia maintains its military buildup on the border of Ukraine "looks like Putin getting what he wants".

One senior official from an eastern Nato state also [told the Financial Times](#) that any talk of compromise with Moscow "must be immediately cut at the root". Russia has said it is expecting "discussion of strategic security on the continent".

Biden's calls on Thursday night were the first direct conversations with the group since he held a [two-hour video call with Vladimir Putin on Tuesday](#). During the virtual summit, he warned the Russian president about potential sanctions if he launched an offensive in Ukraine.

Directly after that call, he spoke with Boris Johnson, Angela Merkel of Germany, Emmanuel Macron of France, and Mario Draghi of Italy. Biden has said the talks with Russia will include "at least four of our major Nato allies and Russia to discuss the future of Russia's concerns relative to Nato writ large".

Michal Baranowski, the director of the German Marshall Fund's Warsaw office, said that there had been support in Poland for Biden's strong response to Russia's military buildup in Ukraine, which has included threats of sanctions against Russia and vocal support for Ukraine's sovereignty.

The decision to announce the new Russia talks had caused "confusion" and "some anger" in Poland, he said, because it signalled a change of direction in the White House's thinking.

It would be "detrimental" if Poland, Romania, and other eastern flank countries were excluded from the talks, he said.

"The reaction would be very negative and it would send a clear signal to Russia that, look: if you need to talk about European security, don't worry about what those pesky central Europeans are thinking, you just have to talk with the big powers," he said.

Any movement toward limiting who could join Nato would recognise a Russian sphere of influence, he said, putting Poland and other eastern flank countries at greater risk.

"Even if nothing comes out of this, even if they just sat down to just listen to the grievances of the Russians, let alone, God forbid, that there would be any sort of agreement, then people will be talking about Munich and Yalta," he said, referring to past settlements with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

Linkevičius similarly said that Biden's "transparency" in its response to the Russian buildup had been well regarded in Lithuania, and that it was important to maintain unity across Europe and Nato.

HEADLINE	12/10 SKorea govt policy: build 'untact' society
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/10/south-korea-cuts-human-interaction-in-push-to-build-untact-society">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/10/south-korea-cuts-human-interaction-in-push-to-build-untact-society</a>
GIST	<p>For Seoul-based graduate Lee Su-bin, the transition to a new lifestyle during the pandemic was no big deal.</p> <p>“At the university library, I would reserve my books online, which would then be sanitised in a book steriliser before being delivered to a locker for pick up,” the 25-year-old says.</p> <p>“Untact has made many aspects of life so convenient.”</p> <p>Introduced in 2020, “Untact” is a South Korean government policy that aims to spur economic growth by removing layers of human interaction from society. It gathered pace during the pandemic and is expanding rapidly across sectors from healthcare, to business and entertainment.</p> <p>The push to create contactless services is designed increase productivity and cut bureaucracy but has also fuelled concerns over the potential social consequences.</p> <p>Choi Jong-ryul, a sociology professor at Keimyung University, says while there are advantages to developing an untact society, it also threatens social solidarity and may end up isolating individuals.</p> <p>“If more people lose the ‘feeling of contact’ due to lack of face-to-face interaction, society will encounter a fundamental crisis,” Choi says.</p> <p><b>From robots to the metaverse</b></p> <p>In everyday life, small changes brought about by untact are becoming increasingly noticeable.</p> <p>Robots <a href="#">brew coffee</a> and bring beverages to tables in cafes. A robotic arm <a href="#">batters fries and chicken</a> to perfection. At Yonjin Severance Hospital, Keemi – a 5G-powered <a href="#">disinfection robot</a> – sprays hand sanitiser, checks body temperature, polices social distancing, and even tells people off for not wearing masks.</p> <p>Unmanned or <a href="#">hybrid shops</a> are <a href="#">flourishing</a>. Mobile carrier LG Uplus recently opened several <a href="#">untact phone shops</a>, where customers can compare models, sign contracts and receive the latest smartphones without ever having to deal with a real person.</p> <p>Civil services too are getting untact facelifts. Seoul City <a href="#">plans to build a “metaverse”</a> – a virtual space where users can interact with digital representations of people and objects – and avatars of public officials will resolve complaints. Several local governments have launched <a href="#">AI call bots</a> to monitor the health of those self-isolating. For <a href="#">Covid-19 patients</a> receiving home treatment, a <a href="#">government app</a> also monitors health and gives video access to a doctor.</p> <p>The world of K-pop has also stepped into the metaverse. Fans create avatars where they can “meet” their favourites like <a href="#">Blackpink in a virtual space</a> and receive virtual autographs.</p> <p><b>Economic boost</b></p> <p>Untact in South Korea is more than a buzzword: it represents a potential economic engine for the country.</p> <p>“Untact companies have shown greater growth effects than face-to-face companies in attracting investment and creating jobs,” South Korea’s small business and startups minister Kwon Chil-seung told the Guardian, noting that 12 out of 15 Korean unicorn companies - private firms valued at US\$1bn (£750m) or more - use non-face-to-face methods in their primary business.</p>

“South Korea has a very strong (communications) infrastructure in the country and many industries based on that infrastructure,” he says, adding that untact is part of a growing global trend that has accelerated in light of the pandemic.

His ministry is so serious about the policy that it is pumping 9tn won (\$7.6bn) into an “untact growth fund” to find and support 1,200 untact startups by 2025.

Many have welcomed the shift. The [Seoul Institute](#) found that 80% of residents in the capital who had engaged in non-face-to-face activities said they would continue doing so after the pandemic subsided.

Sociologist Choi Jong-ryul says untact provided some advantages - including allowing anonymity through electronic devices, freeing people from the pressures of formality and reducing emotional labour associated with the service industry. The latter problem is [particularly acute in South Korea](#), where customer service is highly valued, hierarchical structures persist, and abusive behaviour by those in positions of power, [known as ‘gapjil’, is commonplace](#).

But concerns over feelings of loneliness and social fragmentation remain.

The country [recently announced](#) plans to invest almost 30bn won (\$25.4m) to research a digital treatment platform for depression, a project kickstarted as a result of not having human contact due to the pandemic.

Loneliness among elderly people – an existing problem in South Korea only exacerbated by the pandemic - is also receiving the untact treatment.

SK Telecom’s [AI Care](#) service is among several being deployed across the country that allows seniors living alone to interact with an AI speaker by asking it to play music, have a simple conversation, perform quizzes, or even call for help in an emergency. The system has reportedly reduced loneliness among users, and [even been credited](#) with saving lives by the country’s president.

“These technologies are not replacing humans. It’s about coexisting with humans,” says SK Telecom spokesperson Irene Kim.

#### **‘Social solidarity’**

Lee Su-bin says while she was comfortable using untact technologies such as unmanned shops, she had concern for others who may “have trouble using them”.

“I had to help a grandfather at an automatic kiosk the other day to order his meal,” she says.

Kwon acknowledges challenges exist regarding those who might be left behind by the sudden digital transformation brought about by untact, and that his government needs to implement policies and regulations to “strike a balance.”

The long-term impact of untact on society remains unclear, but Prof Choi believes an untact future is inevitable to increase economic efficiency.

“The key is understanding the social and ethical implications of an untact society and finding ways to maintain social solidarity.”

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HEADLINE	12/09 Largest food recycling program in US
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/09/california-food-waste-recycling-program-us">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/09/california-food-waste-recycling-program-us</a>
GIST	California will soon enact the largest mandatory residential food waste recycling program in the US in January, an effort designed to dramatically cut down on organic waste in landfills and reduce the state’s methane emissions.

When food scraps such as banana peels and leftover veggies and other organic materials break down they emit methane, a greenhouse gas more potent and damaging in the short-term than carbon emissions from fossil fuels. Organic material such as food and yard waste makes up a fifth of the state's methane emissions and half of everything in California landfills, according to CalRecycle.

California plans to start converting food waste into compost or energy in order to avoid these emissions, becoming the second state to do so after Vermont launched a similar program last year.

"This is the biggest change to trash since recycling started in the 1980s," said Rachel Wagoner, the director of the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery.

Most California residents will be required to toss excess food into green waste bins rather than the trash. Municipalities will then turn the food waste into compost or use it to create biogas, an energy source that is similar to natural gas.

Recycling food waste "is the single easiest and fastest thing that every single person can do to affect climate change", Wagoner said.

The effort reflects growing recognition about the role food waste plays in damaging the environment. Up to 40% of food in the US is wasted, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

A handful of states and countries, including France, have passed laws requiring grocery stores and other large businesses to recycle or donate excess food to charities, but California's program targets households and businesses. In 2016, California passed a law aimed at reducing methane emissions by significantly cutting down on discarded food.

Starting in January, all cities and counties that provide trash services are supposed to have food recycling programs in place and grocery stores must donate edible food that otherwise would be thrown away to food banks or similar organizations.

"There's just no reason to stick this material in a landfill, it just happens to be cheap and easy to do so," said Ned Spang, faculty lead for the Food Loss and Waste Collaborative at the University of California, Davis.

Vermont, home to 625,000 people compared with California's nearly 40 million, is the only other state that bans residents from throwing their food waste in the trash. Under a law that took effect in July 2020, residents can compost the waste in their yards, opt for curbside pick up or drop it at waste stations. Seattle and San Francisco have similar programs.

Under California's new law, the state must cut organic waste in landfills by 75% from 2014 levels by 2025, or from about 23m tons to 5.7m tons.

Most local governments will allow homeowners and apartment dwellers to dump excess food into yard waste bins, with some providing countertop containers to hold the scraps for a few days before taking it outside. Some areas can get exemptions for parts of the law, such as rural locations where bears rummage through trash cans.

The food waste will go to facilities for composting or for turning it into energy through anaerobic digestion, a process that creates biogas that can be used like natural gas for heating and electricity.

But only a fifth of California's composting facilities may accept food waste, and they face a strict permitting process to take food waste alongside traditional green waste such as leaves.

The state also set a 2025 goal of diverting 20% of food that would otherwise go to landfills to feed people in need. Supermarkets must start donating their excess food in January and hotels, restaurants, hospitals,

schools and large event venues will start doing so in 2024. The donation part of the law will contribute toward a federal goal of cutting food waste in half by 2030.

Davis, California, already has a mandatory food recycling program. Joy Klineberg puts coffee grounds, fruit rinds and cooking scraps into a metal bin labeled “compost” on her countertop. When preparing dinners, she empties excess food from the cutting board into the bin.

Every few days, she dumps the contents into her green waste bin outside, which is picked up and sent to a county facility. Unpleasant countertop bin smells haven’t been a problem, she said.

“All you’re changing is where you’re throwing things, it’s just another bin,” she said. “It’s really easy, and it’s amazing how much less trash you have.”

Implementing similar programs in bigger cities is more challenging.

Los Angeles and San Diego, the state’s two most populous cities, which together account for about one of every eight Californians, are among those that won’t have their programs ready for all households next month.

That’s because it takes time to buy the necessary equipment, such as green waste bins for households that don’t already have them for yard waste and to set up facilities to take the material. Trash collection fees will go up in many places.

CalRecycle also wants to focus more on education and less on punishment. Governments can avoid penalties by self-reporting to the state by March if they don’t have programs in place and outlining plans for starting them. Cities that refuse to comply could eventually be fined up to \$10,000 a day.

Ken Prue, the deputy director of San Diego’s environmental services department, said the city put nearly \$9m in this year’s budget to buy more waste bins, countertop containers and trucks to haul the additional waste.

Prue hopes San Diego residents will quickly realize the importance of recycling food waste after the program starts next summer.

“Hopefully before they know it, it becomes second nature,” he said.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Africa CDC: may turn to vaccine mandates</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-africa-kenya-centers-for-disease-control-and-prevention-6a062174b98302c70bdf546562379497">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-africa-kenya-centers-for-disease-control-and-prevention-6a062174b98302c70bdf546562379497</a>
GIST	<p>NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — African governments might have to resort to COVID-19 vaccine mandates if their citizens don’t hurry to get the increasingly available doses, the director of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday.</p> <p>The warning by John Nkengasong to reporters that governments “will not have a choice” came as the flow of doses to Africa’s 54 countries grows but vaccine hesitancy — and the short shelf life of some donations — create new pressures to get them into the arms of the continent’s 1.3 billion people.</p> <p>“We don’t need to get there if we just do the right thing,” Nkengasong said of vaccine mandates. He called any lack of interest in vaccine uptake “extremely unfortunate” after African officials have fought for months against dramatic vaccine inequality between their nations and richer ones around the world.</p> <p>Africa remains the world’s least vaccinated continent against COVID-19, with less than 8% of the continent’s population fully jabbed.</p>



Now the rapidly spreading omicron variant, first identified in southern Africa and now reported in 11 African countries, is driving a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases on the continent. New cases in the past week surged by 93%, the World Health Organization said, though “there are signs of hope as preliminary data indicates that hospitalizations across South Africa remain low” and the new variant might cause less severe illness.

Only six African countries have met the global target of vaccinating 40% of their populations against COVID-19 by the end of this year, and “this is simply dangerous and untenable,” a WHO immunization official, Richard Mihigo, told reporters on Thursday.

Some countries including Zimbabwe and Ghana have turned to vaccine mandates for public employees and others, not without objections. Kenya’s plan to require COVID-19 vaccinations for access to government services starting later this month has brought criticism.

African nations have procured 431 million vaccine doses so far and administered 245 million, the Africa CDC’s Nkengasong said, adding that “you can’t even talk of a booster when you have people who haven’t received their first dose.”

The African continent is now receiving around 20 million vaccine doses a week, an encouraging trend, the WHO’s Mihigo said, “but it is very important that these donations come with shelf life” instead of a rapidly looming expiration date. Some countries, unable to distribute them in time, have handed back doses or destroyed them.

Mihigo also warned of “potential diversion” of vaccines by richer countries seeking to administer additional, booster doses to their own citizens, including children.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 UK faces omicron wave, uncertainty</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/world/europe/uk-omicron-spreading-restrictions.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/world/europe/uk-omicron-spreading-restrictions.html</a>
GIST	<p>LONDON — With cases of the Omicron variant doubling every three days and the government doing an about-face on restrictions it had long resisted, Britain is bracing for a new coronavirus surge, unsure if it will be a relatively minor event or a return to the dark days of earlier pandemic waves.</p> <p>So far, the number of Omicron cases — 817 confirmed by Thursday, though officials say the real figure is likely much higher — is small compared with the daily average of 48,000 new coronavirus cases overall. But the government’s Health Security Agency warned that if the recent growth rate continues, “we expect to see at least 50 percent of Covid-19 cases to be caused by the Omicron variant in the next two to four weeks.”</p> <p>Early evidence in Britain backs up tentative findings elsewhere, notably in South Africa, where the heavily mutated new variant is already widespread: It appears to be the most contagious form of the virus yet, a previous case of Covid-19 provides little immunity to it, and vaccines seem less effective against it. But it also seems to cause less severe illness than earlier variants.</p> <p>Britain’s experience with Omicron may be a harbinger of what others can expect. Until now, it has been looser about social restrictions than many other nations in Western Europe, and Britain ordinarily has extensive travel to and from South Africa, so it could be the first wealthy country to be hit hard by Omicron. It also has one of the world’s most robust systems for sequencing viral genomes, so it can identify and track new variants earlier and more thoroughly than other countries.</p> <p>“I think we are looking at a horrible winter,” said Peter English, a retired consultant in communicable disease control, noting the exponential spread of Omicron.</p> <p>Much remains to be learned about the variant, but experts say that what is known so far is worrying. Jeffrey Barrett, the director of the Covid-19 genomics initiative at the Wellcome Sanger Institute in</p>



Britain, said the new data made one thing clear: “It will spread very fast, even in countries that have a very high vaccination rate like the U.K.”

The current estimate that Omicron is doubling roughly every three days, in a country where 70 percent of people are fully vaccinated and 32 percent have had a booster dose, is “really striking,” he added.

“We haven’t seen that kind of rate of growth since I think the March 2020 time when the original virus was spreading in a totally naïve population, when none of us really knew anything about it,” he said.

Even if Omicron infection is less severe on the whole, experts warn that if it leads to an enormous surge in cases, even a small percentage of them resulting in seriously ill patients could once again overwhelm hospitals and cause a spike in deaths.

Dr. Barrett said he was more worried than he was about the previous variants. The possibility that Omicron cases are less severe and that vaccines could still offer some protection mean that the picture could be less pessimistic, he said, but he added, “I don’t think any country should be gambling on that chance right now.”

Michael Ryan, the head of the World Health Organization’s health emergencies program, warned during a news conference that as the world has seen before with other variants, “if they are allowed to spread unchecked even though they are not individually more virulent or more lethal, they just generate more cases, they put pressure on the health system and more people die. That’s what we can avoid.”

The W.H.O. chief, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, acknowledged that there was some evidence that Omicron caused milder illness than Delta, though it was too early to be definitive.

On Wednesday, Britain adopted a new strategy in response to Omicron, urging people to work from home where possible, introducing new mask mandates and requiring people to show vaccine passports for entry to some venues. It was a striking reversal for Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who had opposed stricter controls that have been adopted around Europe, which was suffering through its biggest coronavirus wave so far before Omicron appeared.

Britain’s Health Security Agency released new data on Wednesday that it said “suggests that Omicron is displaying a significant growth advantage over Delta,” which had previously been the fastest-spreading variant and has become the dominant one worldwide.

Analysis of the data collected in Britain showed increased household transmission risk, a key indicator of how fast the variant can spread. The health agency cautioned that the data was still sparse and the conclusions tentative, with deeper studies underway. But Britain’s genomic sequencing system offers some of the strongest evidence yet on the variant.

All positive coronavirus tests from people arriving in Britain are sent for genomic sequencing, and as part of the country’s routine surveillance, around 15 to 20 percent of all positive P.C.R. tests of people already in the country are also sent for sequencing.

“It’s not going to take long before it becomes obvious in other places, but it’s clearer earlier here,” Dr. Barrett said. “I think other countries should basically assume the same thing is happening.”

The genomic surveillance could also give Britain a head start in determining how severe Omicron cases are, though there will be a lag because it takes days or weeks for a person who gets infected to become seriously ill.

“It is increasingly evident that Omicron is highly infectious and there is emerging laboratory and early clinical evidence to suggest that both vaccine-acquired and naturally acquired immunity against infection is reduced for this variant,” Susan Hopkins, the chief medical adviser to the Health Security Agency, said in a statement.

	<p>Experts fear what that could mean for Britain’s already struggling National Health Service.</p> <p>“A lot of staff have left or are burnt out,” Dr. English said, after months of dealing with the strains of the pandemic. “Now we’re going to have another big hit — very likely — from Omicron. I am really, really sympathetic toward my poor colleagues working in clinical practice at the moment.”</p> <p>Chaand Nagpaul, the chair of the British Medical Association, a trade union for doctors and medical students, said the government decision was the right one and had come at a crucial moment.</p> <p>He said in a statement that the country had been having “increasingly high incidences of Covid-19 for some time,” adding that “health care workers are rightly worried about the impact the Omicron variant could have” on the health system’s ability to function if caseloads rise fast.</p> <p>Some hospitals have already canceled elective care again, a strategy seen at the start of the pandemic to free up resources for treating coronavirus patients. Patients are already experiencing hourslong waits for ambulances as a result of the existing pressures on the system, Dr. Nagpaul added.</p> <p>“While the number of Covid hospitalizations today is much lower than last winter, we must not risk complacency by ignoring the rapid doubling of Omicron cases every two to three days,” he said.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/09 States enlist National Guard to help</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/09/world/omicron-variant-covid#states-enlist-national-guard-to-help-staff-hospitals-and-nursing-homes">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/09/world/omicron-variant-covid#states-enlist-national-guard-to-help-staff-hospitals-and-nursing-homes</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>The National Guard has been asked to help staff hospitals in at least four states as another virus surge is overstressing healthcare systems and straining overtaxed workers.</p> <p>On Thursday, the largest hospital network in Indiana announced that it had asked the Guard for assistance for most of its hospitals. Hospitalizations in the state have increased 49 percent over the past two weeks, according to data from The New York Times.</p> <p>Six-person teams with both medical support and non-clinical members will deploy to Indiana University Health across the state in two-week increments. All Guard members are fully vaccinated, the statement said.</p> <p>“The demand and strain on IU Health’s team members, nurses and providers has never been greater,” the hospital system said in a statement.</p> <p>New Hampshire and Maine took similar measures on Wednesday.</p> <p>In New Hampshire, 70 National Guard members will be deployed the next few weeks to help hospitals with nonmedical functions like food service and clerical work. On top of that, Gov. Chris Sununu said at a news conference, the Federal Emergency Management Agency was dispatching a team of 24 people to assist the hardest-hit facilities.</p> <p>More than 55,000 coronavirus patients are hospitalized nationwide, far fewer than in September, but an increase of more than 20 percent over the past two weeks, according to a New York Times database.</p> <p>The United States is averaging over 121,300 cases a day, an increase of about 27 percent from two weeks ago. Reported deaths are up 12 percent, to an average of about 1,275 per day.</p> <p>Last week, New York State also turned to National Guard troops to reinforce overburdened nursing homes. Gov. Kathy Hochul issued “a pre-emptive strike,” ordering that roughly 30 hospitals nearing their capacity stop performing elective surgeries.</p>

Hospitalizations in the state remained much lower than the highs of last winter or spring. The new restrictions will mostly impact hospitals upstate.

“We continue to see an uptick in hospitalizations,” Ms. Hochul said at a news conference on Thursday. “This is what keeps me up at night.”

Gov. Charlie Baker of Massachusetts signaled that he could take similar measures on Thursday.

Kentucky has yet to enlist the National Guard, but long-term staff shortages plague health care facilities there.

On Thursday, Gov. Andy Beshear declared that the state’s chronic nursing shortage was an emergency, with shortages of up to 20 percent. Mr. Beshear said he would sign an executive order aimed at boosting enrollment in training programs for nurses.

Even states that rank among the highest in vaccination rates are struggling, like Maine, where about 73 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, behind only Vermont and Rhode Island, according to a New York Times database. Cases in Maine recently reached their pandemic peak.

Gov. Janet Mills of Maine activated as many as 75 state Guard members to help hospitals there. She said they would support nursing facilities and administer monoclonal antibodies, which help prevent serious illness.

Maine Medical Center, the state’s largest hospital, said in a statement on Wednesday that there had been times this week “when there were no critical care beds available,” forcing hospital leaders to postpone surgeries.

“We are caring for an unprecedented number of patients,” the hospital said.

Officials are bracing for the Omicron variant, but the Delta variant remains the more imminent threat. Health care workers staff shortages brought on by burnout, illnesses and resistance to vaccine mandates have made the situation even more dire.

In Missouri, where 52 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, hospitalizations are up 43 percent in the past two weeks, data shows. More than 1,680 people were hospitalized with Covid as of Wednesday, compared with about 980 on Nov. 8.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Canceled practices: virus trouble in NBA?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/09/world/omicron-variant-covid#nba-covid-pacers-raptors">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/09/world/omicron-variant-covid#nba-covid-pacers-raptors</a>
GIST	<p>The Indiana Pacers and Toronto Raptors basketball teams abruptly canceled their practices Thursday, citing the N.B.A.’s Covid-19 health and safety protocols and “an abundance of caution.”</p> <p>It wasn’t immediately clear exactly what precipitated the cancellations. Players can be subject to the protocols either by testing positive for the coronavirus or by being exposed to someone who has.</p> <p>The Raptors and Pacers played in separate games Wednesday, but on that day’s injury report, only the Pacers listed a player — guard Justin Holiday — in the protocols. Neither team had a game Thursday, and they were not required to submit new injury reports until 5 p.m. Eastern time. Just after noon, a spokeswoman for the Raptors told The New York Times that no one on the team was in the Covid protocols.</p> <p>The Pacers are scheduled to host the Dallas Mavericks on Friday, while the Raptors are set to host the Knicks.</p>

	<p>In recent weeks, the N.B.A. has seen a rise in the numbers of players placed in the protocols. The league instituted mandatory testing on Nov. 28, 29 and 30, following the Thanksgiving holiday, regardless of players' vaccination status. Before that, vaccinated players were not required to be tested frequently.</p> <p>The Los Angeles Lakers' LeBron James was in the protocols briefly last week and missed a game after a positive test result; he was allowed to return to action after several follow-up tests were negative, indicating that the first one was a false positive.</p> <p>The Chicago Bulls have four players in protocols, including one of their stars, DeMar DeRozan. The Charlotte Hornets listed five this week, including their top player, LaMelo Ball, who won the Rookie of the Year Award last season.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Waning mRNA protection some older adults</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/09/world/omicron-variant-covid#protection-from-mrna-vaccines-wanes-for-some-older-adults-a-cdc-study-finds">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/09/world/omicron-variant-covid#protection-from-mrna-vaccines-wanes-for-some-older-adults-a-cdc-study-finds</a>
GIST	<p>The Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines may offer older adults with underlying conditions waning protection against hospitalization four months after full inoculation, according to data <a href="#">released</a> on Thursday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>But the vaccines continued to provide significant defense, remaining at least 75 percent effective at keeping people from being hospitalized with Covid-19, the data showed.</p> <p>The new study focused on a cohort of older, hospitalized military veterans, so its findings are not applicable to the broader population. But it offers new insight about the potential <a href="#">waning</a> of the vaccines' benefits — and strengthens the argument for boosters.</p> <p>Seniors, who were among the first to be vaccinated in the United States, face a heightened risk of hospitalization from Covid-19. And infections among older people can cause <a href="#">stealthy, unexpected symptoms</a>, according to an August study in the Journals of Gerontology.</p> <p>The C.D.C. study included 1,896 participants with a median age of 67 years, 92.7 percent of whom were male.</p> <p>In this group, the researchers found that the mRNA vaccines offered strong protection against Covid-related hospitalizations in the first four months after the participants became <a href="#">fully vaccinated</a> — a point about two weeks after the second dose, according to the C.D.C.</p> <p>During those four months, the Moderna vaccine was 90 percent effective at preventing hospitalization and Pfizer-BioNTech was 86 percent effective, the study showed. But after that period, Moderna's protection rate dropped to 86 percent and Pfizer-BioNTech's to 75 percent.</p> <p>These findings echo a <a href="#">C.D.C. study from September</a> that found waning protection by the Pfizer vaccine in a group of adults with a median age of 68.</p> <p>The new study analyzed levels of antibodies — the protective proteins generated by the immune system — in some participants as a way of measuring the effectiveness of the vaccine. Antibody levels were higher among recipients of the Moderna vaccine than among those who received the Pfizer doses. But both groups experienced a decline in antibody levels over time.</p> <p>The data was collected at five Veterans Affairs medical centers from Feb. 1 to Sept. 30, before the Omicron variant was <a href="#">first reported</a> in the United States in November.</p>

	<p>There is still not enough data on Omicron to know whether it is more dangerous than previous variants, such as Delta, although some evidence suggests that the variant <a href="#">can reinfect</a> people more readily. But the continued spread of the Omicron variant may render the findings of the new study outdated.</p> <p>The authors of the study said their findings underscored the need for booster shots to maintain long-term protection against severe illness. As of Tuesday, 55 percent of eligible seniors have received a booster, the White House coronavirus response coordinator, Jeff Zients, said in a <a href="#">news conference</a>.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Schools close unexpectedly or go remote</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/09/world/omicron-variant-covid#us-schools-are-closing-unexpectedly-leaving-parents-in-the-lurch">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/09/world/omicron-variant-covid#us-schools-are-closing-unexpectedly-leaving-parents-in-the-lurch</a>
GIST	<p>DETROIT — Caitlin Reynolds, a single mother, was happy that her son, L.J., was finally settled into fourth grade after a rocky experience last year with remote learning.</p> <p>Then, on Wednesday, Nov. 17, came an <a href="#">announcement</a>: Detroit public schools would close their classrooms every Friday in December. There would be virtual school only. On Friday, another announcement: School was canceled starting that Monday, <a href="#">for the entire week</a> of Thanksgiving. This time, there would be no online option.</p> <p>After a few months of relative calm, some public schools are going remote — or canceling class entirely — once a week, or even for a few weeks, because of teacher burnout or staff shortages. Several Michigan districts extended Thanksgiving break; three in Washington State <a href="#">unexpectedly closed on Nov. 12</a>, the day after Veterans Day; and in Florida, Brevard schools <a href="#">used leftover “hurricane days”</a> to close schools Thanksgiving week. Some closings have occurred with little notice, causing major logistical problems for parents and worries that children will fall further behind.</p> <p>For many districts, remote learning days are a last-ditch effort to prevent teachers who say they are burned out from resigning after a tough year of working with learning loss, and putting in overtime to make up for labor shortages.</p> <p>Battles in the classroom — over mask mandates and critical race theory — have also taken a toll, said Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, the country’s second-largest teachers’ union.</p> <p>“What you hear from teachers is that it’s been too much,” she said. “And they’re trying the best that they can.”</p> <p>Parents say they are doing the same, but for some it comes down to being home when school is canceled on short notice or losing pay or stature at work.</p> <p>“It’s very difficult already being a single parent, period,” said Kristina Morgan of Southfield, Mich., who works for the Wayne County courts and, when school is canceled on short notice, relies on relatives to care for her daughter Kennedy Martinez. If no one is available, she must take the day off work, which reflects poorly on her at the office. “When you have your life figured out based on your child being in school during certain hours — and when I have to scramble to find child care outside of those hours, or to ask around — it’s frustrating,” she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Vaccine supply-demand vulnerable places</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/09/world/vaccine-inequity-supply.html">https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/09/world/vaccine-inequity-supply.html</a>
GIST	The detection of the Omicron variant has brought renewed attention, and a new urgency, to the worldwide Covid-19 vaccination campaign, which experts say remains among the most powerful tools at our disposal when it comes to preventing dangerous new variants.

Most wealthy countries have vaccinated significant shares of their populations and have rapidly moved into the booster-dose phase. But one year into the global vaccine rollout, the gap between vaccination rates in high- and low-income countries is wider than ever.

Poorly vaccinated countries face several challenges. Early in the rollout process, some countries were not able to secure enough doses to inoculate their residents, and many still face shortages. In others, supply is only part of the story. A New York Times analysis of available data highlights the countries where infrastructure issues and the public's level of willingness to get vaccinated may pose larger obstacles than supply.

Some countries that have below-average vaccination rates are using most of the vaccine doses they have on hand, and some are not. Most countries with high vaccination rates have used most of the doses delivered to them; they are clustered to the right side of the chart above.

If a country is using most of its available doses but still has a low overall vaccination rate, that is a sign of a supply problem, experts say: The country is not receiving an adequate number of doses to immunize its willing population. Those countries fall further to the right side of the below-average vaccination section of the chart.

If a country with a low vaccination rate is using a smaller share of the doses it has on hand, it suggests that demand in the country is weak, experts say, or that it lacks the infrastructure to distribute vaccines. Those are countries that fall further to the left.

"There may be varied reasons for low vaccine uptake," said Dr. Amesh Adalja, an infectious disease specialist at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. "The most obvious is just lack of doses, and that would be represented by those countries who use everything they get."

### **Unequal distribution**

In the early days of the pandemic, when drug makers were just starting to develop vaccines, wealthier countries were able to pre-order enough to [cover their populations](#) several times over, while others had trouble securing any doses.

Now, experts say those early purchases have led to continued gaps in vaccination rates.

"In terms of equity, things are worse than six months ago as we see the disparities in vaccine purchases translate into disparities in vaccination coverage," said Andrea Taylor, a researcher at Duke University who has studied the purchase agreements.

Wealthier countries, including the United States, have donated more than 700 million doses to lower-income countries, according to UNICEF. Experts say the donations are crucial to improving vaccination rates around the world and slowing the evolution of the coronavirus and, in turn, new variants, which can cause outbreaks in even highly vaccinated populations.

"We are entering a third calendar year of Covid-driven cycles of lockdowns and reopenings, sparked largely by regular and predictable emergences of new variants," said Benjamin Schreiber, the deputy chief of UNICEF's global immunization program. "The longer the virus continues to spread unchecked, the higher the risk of more deadly or contagious variants emerging. Vaccine equity is not charity; it is an epidemiological necessity."

### **What hesitancy looks like**

Weak demand simply means that people in a given country who have good access to vaccines are not showing up to get vaccinated. Experts say the reasons people have for refusing the shot vary widely around the world.

“Each country and each community has its own issues and there is no one-size-fits-all approach,” Mr. Schreiber said.

For some, hesitancy is less about mistrust in vaccines than mistrust in their governments, said Kaveh Khoshnood, an epidemiologist at Yale University.

“There are countries around the world where the people just don’t trust their government,” he said, “because the governments lie sometimes, they are not transparent, they don’t really share information with the public at large.”

Others may be more skeptical about where their vaccines are coming from, such as those who have access only to vaccines from China, Dr. Khoshnood said. “The population might be somewhat hesitant or reluctant or not fully trust the Chinese vaccine, because they don’t feel like there’s enough information out there about the efficacy,” he said.

### **Turning doses into immunizations**

It is also possible for a country to have strong demand and adequate supply “but struggle to deliver those doses to the population because of constraints on transportation, cold chain storage” and other logistical problems, said Bill Moss, the director of the International Vaccine Access Center at Johns Hopkins University.

In countries with large rural populations, the success of a vaccine rollout can come down to the number of people available to give shots. In other words, the “human infrastructure,” said Dr. Sheela Shenoi, an infectious disease specialist at Yale University.

“Similar to what we’ve experienced here in the U.S., any health care delivery system is going to be dependent on the numbers and types of skilled individuals to deliver services,” she said. “Even if there’s vaccine supply, if you don’t have the people to deliver that supply, it’s not going to succeed.”

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*Click on source link to view interactive graphics:*

***Which countries have used the highest share of doses delivered to them?***

***Share of available doses used in least-vaccinated countries***

***Wealthier countries’ head start on vaccination has kept them in the lead***

HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Price gains move sharply, broadening</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/business/economy/inflation-price-gains.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/business/economy/inflation-price-gains.html</a>
GIST	<p>Aquan Brunson, 45 and from Brooklyn, used to buy three slices of cheese pizza from 99 Cents Pizza of Utica for lunch each day. But about three months ago, inflation ate away that third slice. The shop has pasted over its old sign to alert customers that it is now “\$1.50 Hot Pizza.”</p> <p>“The dollar doesn’t take us far,” said Mr. Brunson, patting his greasy lunch down with paper napkins on a gray December afternoon. “The cost of everything is going up.”</p> <p>Consumers across the country can tell you that <a href="#">inflation has been high this year</a>, evidenced by more expensive used cars, pricier furniture and the ongoing demise of New York City’s famous dollar slice. But until recently, policymakers in Washington responded to it with a common refrain: Rapid price increases were likely to be transitory.</p> <p>Last week, policymakers said it was <a href="#">time to retire</a> the label “transitory,” and acknowledged that the price increases have been <a href="#">proving more persistent</a> than expected.</p> <p>Jerome H. Powell, the Fed chair, said that while his basic expectation is that price gains will cool off, there’s a <a href="#">growing threat</a> that they won’t do so soon or sufficiently.</p> <p>“I think the risk of higher inflation has increased,” he said.</p>



A fresh report set for release on Friday is expected to reinforce that concern. The Consumer Price Index could show that inflation picked up by 6.8 percent over the past year, the fastest pace in nearly 40 years. More worrisome for the Fed is that inflation is broadening to many products and services, not just those directly affected by the supply chain woes that have driven up prices for cars and electronics.

Here is a rundown about what to know about the price pops sweeping America and the world — and what to expect when new U.S. consumer price inflation figures are released on Friday.

### **Inflation measures price increases.**

When economists and policymakers talk about “inflation,” they typically mean the increase in prices for the things that people buy out of pocket — tracked by the Consumer Price Index, or C.P.I. — or the change in the cost of things that people consume either out of pocket or through government payments and insurance, which is tracked by the less-timely Personal Consumption Expenditures index.

Both measures are way up this year, and C.P.I. data set for release on Friday is expected to show that inflation picked up by the most since 1982. Back then, Paul Volcker was the Fed chair, and he was waging a war on years of rapid price gains by [pushing interest rates](#) to double digits to cripple business and consumer demand and cool off the economy. Today, interest rates are set at near-zero after policymakers slashed borrowing costs at the beginning of the pandemic.

### **Price gains are becoming broader.**

There are plenty of differences between 1982 and today. Inflation had been low for years leading up to 2021, and pandemic-era lockdowns and the subsequent reopening are behind much of the current price pop.

Consumer demand surged just as rolling factory shutdowns and a reshuffle in spending to goods from services caused manufacturing backlogs and overwhelmed ports. That’s why policymakers were comfortable dismissing high inflation for a while: It came from kinks that seemed likely to eventually work themselves out.

But price gains are increasingly coming from sectors with a less clear-cut, obviously temporary pandemic tieback. Rents, which make up a big chunk of inflation, are rising at a solid clip.

“Housing — that is the key broadening,” said Laura Rosner, an economist at MacroPolicy Perspectives.

The potential for wider and more lasting price pressures have put Fed officials on edge. Policymakers at the central bank, who had been slowly tiptoeing away from supporting the economy, broadcast clearly last week that they are preparing to speed up the retreat.

“They know this report is coming,” Ms. Rosner said of Friday’s anticipated number. “It’s going to confirm and explain why we’ve seen such a sharp shift.”

### **Supply chain snarls are lasting.**

Disruptions to the global flow of goods are not fading as quickly as policymakers had hoped. Additional virus waves have kept factories from running at full speed in Asia and elsewhere. Shipping routes are clogged, and consumers are still buying goods at a robust pace, adding to backlogs and making it hard for the situation to normalize.

Households have some [\\$2.5 trillion in excess savings](#), thanks in part to pandemic-era stimulus, which could help to keep them buying home gym equipment and new coffee tables well into next year.

“The earliest we see things normalizing is really the end of 2022,” said Phil Levy, chief economist at the logistics firm FlexPort. When it comes to misunderstanding inflation, he said, “part of the problem is that we treated the supply chain like it was a special category, like food or energy.”



But as 2021 has made inescapably clear, the global economy is a delicately balanced system. Take the car industry: Virus-spurred semiconductor factory shutdowns in Taiwan delayed new car production. Given the dearth of new autos, rental car companies had to compete with consumers for previously owned vehicles, leaving shortages on used car lots. The chain reaction pushed prices higher at every link along the way.

Global snarls have also helped to push up food prices, as Abdul Batin, owner of 99 Cents Pizza of Utica, can attest. He plans to rebrand it as “\$1.50 Pizza of Utica,” and explains that while some customers balked at the cost increase, he couldn’t help it.

“Everything is going up right now — cheese, flour, even the soda price,” he said.

#### **Wages are also rising.**

Another thing that could keep inflation high? Wages [are climbing swiftly](#), and some companies have begun to talk about passing those rising expenses onto customers, who seem willing and able to pay more. The Employment Cost Index, a measure the Fed watches closely, [picked up notably](#) in the three-month period that ended in September.

The risk is that this is an early, and still dim, echo of the kind of wage-and-price dynamic that helped to fuel higher prices in the 1970s and 1980s. Back then, unions were a much more powerful force, and they helped to make sure pay kept up with rising prices. Inflation and wage gains pushed each other into an upward spiral, to the point that price increases leapt out of control and demanded a Fed response.

In the years since, workers have typically had less formalized bargaining power. But employers are contending with labor shortages as the virus keeps many would-be employees on the sidelines and as demand booms. That is giving workers the ability to command higher pay as they face climbing costs themselves, and it is prompting many employers to lift wages to compete for scarce talent. That could keep demand solid by bolstering peoples’ wherewithal to spend.

“Looking ahead, businesses across all major sectors foresee continued widespread wage hikes,” the New York Fed reported in its section of the Fed’s Beige Book, an anecdotal survey of business and labor contacts carried out by regional Fed banks.

In Atlanta’s region, the Beige Book noted, “several contacts mentioned that labor costs were already being passed along to consumers with little resistance, while others said plans were underway to do so.”

Mr. Brunson — the pizza aficionado — works at a grocery store. They’ve raised his pay, he said, but it is not enough to keep up with climbing cost of food and other expenses.

“They gave us an extra dollar, but that’s just to offset the inflation,” he said. He and his family, three adult children who live with him, are coping by cutting back. “No eating out, less food, less meat.”

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HEADLINE	12/09 Buffalo Starbucks workers unionize
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/business/economy/buffalo-starbucks-union.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/business/economy/buffalo-starbucks-union.html</a>
GIST	<p>Employees at a Buffalo-area Starbucks store have voted to form a union, making it the only one of the nearly 9,000 company-owned stores in the United States to be organized and notching an important symbolic victory for labor at a time when workers across the country are expressing frustration with wages and working conditions.</p> <p>The result, announced on Thursday by the National Labor Relations Board, <a href="#">represents a major challenge</a> to the labor model at the giant coffee retailer, which has argued that its workers enjoy some of the best wages and benefits in the retail and restaurant industry and don’t need a union.</p>

The union was leading in an election at another store, but by a margin smaller than the number of ballots the union was seeking to disqualify through challenges. The challenges must be resolved by the labor agency's regional director in the coming days or weeks before there is a result. Workers at a third store voted against unionizing, according to the board, though a union lawyer contended that some ballots had been delivered to the agency and not counted.

"Although it's a small number of workers, the result has huge symbolic importance and symbols are important when it comes to union organizing," John Logan, a labor studies professor at San Francisco State University, said in an email. "Workers who want to form a union in the United States are forced to take a considerable amount of risk, and it helps if they can see others who have taken that risk and it has paid off."

The unionized employees, who are joining Workers United, an affiliate of the giant Service Employees International Union, received inquiries throughout the campaign from Starbucks workers across the country who said they were paying close attention and were interested in unionizing as well.

"I don't think it will stop in Buffalo, whatsoever," Alexis Rizzo, a worker at one of the stores and a leader in the organizing campaign, said at a news conference after the vote.

Workers cited frustration over understaffing and insufficient training when they filed for union elections at the stores [in late August](#), problems that have dogged the company [for years](#) but which appeared to [worsen during the pandemic](#). Such problems are not unique to Starbucks and have been problems for workers across the restaurant and retail industries for many years.

"We continue on as we did today, yesterday and the day before that," Rossann Williams, Starbucks's president of retail for North America, said in a letter to employees after the vote. "The vote outcomes will not change our shared purpose or how we will show up for each other."

The election occurred through mail ballots that were due Wednesday. In November, workers at [three more Buffalo-area stores](#) filed the paperwork needed to hold union elections, but it was unclear when votes would take place for those outlets.

Starbucks responded to the union campaign with a sense of urgency. Throughout the fall, out-of-town managers and executives — even Ms. Williams — [converged on stores](#) in Buffalo, where they questioned employees about operational challenges and assisted in menial tasks like cleaning bathrooms.

In a video of a meeting in September [viewed by The New York Times](#), a district manager from Arizona told co-workers that the company had asked her to go to Buffalo to help "save it" from unionization.

Several workers who support the union said they found the presence of these officials intimidating and, at times, surreal. They also complained that Starbucks had temporarily closed certain stores in the area, which they found disruptive, and said Starbucks had [excessively added staff](#) in at least one of the three stores that held elections. The workers said this had diluted support for unionization at the store.

"As of today we've done it in spite of everything that the company has thrown at us and we all know it has been an extensive anti-union campaign by Starbucks corporate," Michelle Eisen, a barista at the Buffalo location that unionized who also helped lead the campaign, said at the news conference.

Former National Labor Relations Board officials [have said](#) that these actions by the company could be interpreted as undermining the "laboratory conditions" that are supposed to prevail during union elections and that they could serve as grounds for throwing out a result. Workers involved in the union campaign and a union lawyer indicated that they might challenge the result at the store where workers voted down the union.

A regional director of the labor board [recently overturned](#) a union election at an Amazon warehouse in Alabama on similar grounds.

Starbucks has said that it dispatched out-of-town officials and temporarily closed stores to help solve staffing and training problems and to remodel stores to make them more efficient. The company said that it added staff to deal with an increase in the number of workers calling in sick and that it had taken such steps across the country since the spring, when coronavirus infection rates dropped and stores became busier.

Ms. Williams, the North America president, said in an interview on Wednesday from Buffalo that she did not feel that the run-up to the vote had been especially contentious and that she had spent much of her time there this fall listening to employees (partners, in the company's words) and addressing "the conditions that partners had pointed out."

The key issue at the store whose vote was unresolved, near the Buffalo airport, was whether several workers who cast ballots were actually employed at the store. The union argues that they were employed at another store in the area and worked at the airport store for only a short period of time. The company said they were eligible to vote under the labor board's rules.

The outcome could be important for determining the union's leverage when it seeks to negotiate a contract. Under the law, an employer is obligated to bargain with a union in good faith, but there is no requirement that it actually agree to a contract, and the consequences of failing to bargain in good faith are limited.

"The incentives to resist bargaining are significant for the employer," said Kate Andrias, a labor law expert at Columbia Law School. "If workers are able to win a good contract, it sets a precedent."

Professor Andrias said that the ability to win a contract in such situations often hinged on the amount of economic pressure the union can exert, and that having a second unionized store could help in this regard.

Ms. Eisen, the worker at the store that unionized, said at the news conference that the workers would like to "offer the olive branch to the company and say, 'Let's put this behind us.'" She added: "Now is the time, let's get to the bargaining table as quickly as possible."

Starbucks has faced other union campaigns over the years, including one in [New York City](#) in the 2000s and one in 2019 [in Philadelphia](#), where it fired two employees involved in organizing, a move that a labor board judge [found](#) unlawful. The company appealed the ruling and a decision is still pending.

Neither of those campaigns succeeded, but workers are unionized at Starbucks stores owned by other companies that operate them under licensing agreements. And workers at a company-owned store in Canada [recently unionized](#).

A handful of the company's [early stores in Seattle had a union](#) and were represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers in the 1980s. The union was decertified.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Glimmers of hope supply chain nightmare</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/09/business/inflation-supply-chains-economy/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/09/business/inflation-supply-chains-economy/index.html</a>
GIST	<p><b>New York (CNN Business)</b>Epic port congestion is easing. Shipping prices are falling from sky-high levels. Deliveries are speeding up a bit. There are growing signs that the supply chain mess is finally starting to get cleaned up.</p> <p>That's not to say the <a href="#">supply chain nightmare</a> is over. It's not. And the situation may not get anywhere near back to normal anytime soon.</p> <p>Businesses are still grappling with a troubling <a href="#">shortage of truck drivers</a>. Critical components, <a href="#">including computer chips</a>, remain scarce. And the Omicron variant threatens to put renewed pressure on supply chains.</p>

Still, there is evidence that bottlenecks are beginning to unclog. That is encouraging given that unprecedented stress on supply chains has contributed significantly to historic levels of inflation in the United States.

"I'm increasingly confident that the worst appears to be over," Matt Colyar, economist at Moody's Analytics, told CNN. "There is data suggesting that things are improving. But there's still a ton of uncertainty."

The supply chain chaos was largely caused by the pandemic. Logistics networks came under enormous strain when the world economy shut down at the onset of Covid — and then rapidly reopened. Demand for goods skyrocketed and just-in-time supply chains buckled under the pressure. Covid outbreaks and inconsistent health protocols around the world added to the mess.

### **Factories signal progress**

But glimmers of hope can be found in recent economic reports.

For instance, the backlog of orders index in the [Institute for Supply Management's manufacturing survey](#) fell to 61.9 in November, down from a record high of 70.6 in May. Backlogs are still growing, but at a slower pace. And supplier delivery rates appear to be improving, albeit from very poor levels.

"It is still going to take a long time for the supply chains across the country to be fully restored, but at least the first steps appear to be in place towards normalcy," Thomas Simons, economist at Jefferies, wrote in a recent note to clients.

The Dallas Federal Reserve Bank's [manufacturing index](#) showed the level of unfilled orders ticked lower in November and the amount of time to deliver goods fell.

The improvement in delivery times is encouraging because it is happening even as new orders, production and shipments increase.

"This suggests the improvement is because the surveyed manufacturers' were better able to get stuff out the door, not just because demand cooled down and the phones stopped ringing," said Colyar of Moody's.

### **Port congestion, shipping prices ease**

Improvement has been more dramatic in clearing up the traffic jam of container ships parked outside California ports.

As of Wednesday, [there were 30 container vessels anchored](#) off the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles. That's down from a peak of more than 80 at the height of port congestion.

The Biden administration has made a [concerted effort to ease pressure on ports](#), including by convincing the Port of Los Angeles to [move to 24/7 operations](#).

In another positive, ocean borne shipping costs fell 5% in November, though they remain "multiple times" higher than pre-Covid levels, according to Oxford Economics.

Barclays says global shipping costs "appear to have peaked."

"We see the rapid decline in container vessels waiting to unload and falling global shipping prices as possibly leading to some easing in supply bottlenecks," Barclays economists wrote in a recent report, "which if continued, could downstream into other modes of transportation later."

### **White House hails progress on ports**

Sameera Fazili, deputy director of the White House's National Economic Council, told CNN she is "heartened" by the fact that long-dwelling containers at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach have come down sharply.

"That's huge. It shows that we've finally restored some fluidity to the system and taken away some of that congestion," said Fazili, who leads coordination of the Supply Chain Disruptions Task Force. "We're happy with the progress but not taking our foot off the gas."

Fazili highlighted that the Biden administration was able to recently convince one leading ocean carrier to [commit to offering \\$100 discounts](#) on containers that are quickly picked up and \$200 if they are picked up during off-peak hours.

"We're hopeful that other ocean carriers will see that as a model and seek to emulate it," Fazili said. "That's a very highly concentrated industry and they've seen record-breaking profits."

Some business leaders are also cheering signs of progress.

CEOs "see supply chains starting to open up, although much more slowly than they would like," Joshua Bolten, CEO of the Business Roundtable, told reporters last week.

### **'Trucking, trucking, trucking'**

Others are less optimistic.

"Not only is anyone not seeing a light at the end of the tunnel right now, they are not expecting to see one until well into 2023," Geoff Freeman, CEO of the Consumer Brands Association, told CNN.

Freeman, whose trade group represents companies including Coca-Cola, Kellogg and Procter & Gamble, said the consumer-packaged goods industry has a mostly US-based supply chain, meaning it doesn't feel the benefits of the port improvements as much as others.

"The ports are one modest player in this situation," Freeman said. "For us, it's really about trucking, trucking, trucking. The trucking situation is not getting any better."

The shortage of truck drivers is not new, but it has been made worse by Covid. The American Trucking Associations estimate the industry is short a [record-high 80,000 truck drivers](#).

It's hard to see how supply chains can get back to healthy levels until the truck driver shortage eases.

Freeman encouraged the Biden administration to convince more states to follow in the footsteps of California, South Carolina and Ohio by relaxing state regulations that limit maximum truck weights.

"The White House could be using the power of the bully pulpit here to encourage more states to get in line," Freeman said.

Asked if the White House has considered leaning more heavily on states to relax trucking weight restrictions, Fazili said: "Overweight permits are a state-level decision. When states call us, we make sure they have the information they need to take action."

Fazili added that the administration continues to work with the industry to try to find solutions on trucking capacity.

### **Chip shortage lingers**

There remains a lot of uncertainty over when supply chains can get back to normal, or something close to it.

Most (58%) economists surveyed by the National Association of Business Economics anticipate that the supply of goods will begin normalizing in the first half of next year. And nearly a quarter (22%) say this process has already started or will before the end of this year.

The worldwide shortage of computer chips continues to snarl global supply chains, limiting the production of a range of products, including iPhones and new cars.

The chip shortage is having an "extreme impact" on the autos industry, causing the largest decline in vehicle inventories on record, according to Citigroup. And that has caused prices to surge on new and used cars, contributing to the fastest rate of inflation since the early 1990s.

Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo told CNN last week that this highly disruptive shortage is [unlikely to go away until "deep into 2022."](#)

### **The Omicron factor**

Raimondo also conceded there is [reason to worry Omicron will increase stress](#) on global supply chains by making people scared to work in tight quarters like factories.

There's also a risk that Omicron snarls the production and shipment of goods in China and other countries that have zero-tolerance Covid policies.

"That's the worst-case scenario for a global economy struggling to get goods at the rate demand is asking for them," said Colyar, the Moody's economist.

All of this is another reminder of how the world economy remains subject to the whims of the pandemic, for better or worse.

For its part, the Biden administration emphasizes it's not seeking to get back to business-as-usual — because that turned out to be a broken model.

"Covid laid bare that we had really weak supply chains," said Fazili. "Returning to a pre-pandemic norm isn't what we are aiming for here. We are trying to build back stronger and in new ways."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 WHO warns against vaccine hoarding</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/who-warns-against-vaccine-hoarding-poor-countries-go-without-2021-12-09/">https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/who-warns-against-vaccine-hoarding-poor-countries-go-without-2021-12-09/</a>
GIST	<p>GENEVA, Dec 9 (Reuters) - The World Health Organization warned wealthy countries on Thursday against hoarding COVID-19 vaccines for booster shots as they try to fight off the <a href="#">new Omicron variant</a>, threatening supplies to poorer countries where inoculation rates are low.</p> <p>Many Western nations have been rolling out boosters, targeting the elderly and people with underlying health issues, but worries about the fast-spreading Omicron have prompted some to expand their programmes.</p> <p>The WHO <a href="#">recommended boosters</a> instead for those with health issues, or those who have received an inactivated shot.</p> <p>The jury is still out on how effective current vaccines are against Omicron. They have so far proved hugely successful in slowing the spread of the coronavirus and the severity of illness, and low rates of inoculation pose the risk of more dangerous and more vaccine-resistant variants emerging.</p> <p>"As we head into whatever the Omicron situation is going to be, there is risk that the global supply is again going to revert to high-income countries hoarding vaccine," the WHO's vaccine director, <a href="#">Kate O'Brien</a>, told a briefing.</p>



"...It's not going to work. It's not going to work from an epidemiologic perspective and it's not going to work from a transmission perspective unless we actually have vaccine going to all countries."

Mike Ryan, WHO emergencies director, said Omicron appeared to be "fitter and faster" but it was not invincible.

"We don't fully understand the implications clinically or the implications for our vaccines. ... What we do in the coming days and weeks, both in terms of virus suppression, vaccination and equity will make a huge difference to the evolution of this pandemic in 2022," he said.

Omicron was first detected in southern Africa and Hong Kong and Africa accounts for 46% of reported cases globally, Richard Mihigo, coordinator of the WHO's Immunisation and Vaccine Development Programme for Africa, told an online briefing.

Early hospital data from South Africa shows fewer than a third of patients admitted during the latest wave linked to Omicron were suffering severe illness, compared with two thirds in early stages of the last two waves.

Just 7.5% of more than one billion people in Africa have had primary vaccine shots.

#### SHORT SHELF LIFE

O'Brien's warning came as supplies to the global COVAX vaccine-sharing programme run by the WHO and charity GAVI have increased in the past few months due to donations from wealthy countries and after India eased limits on exports of vaccines.

She said a major problem for COVAX had been wealthy countries donating vaccines with a relatively [short shelf life](#).

The WHO has said in recent months that administering primary doses should be [a priority](#) and its vaccine advisory panel recommended on Thursday that people who are immunocompromised or received an inactivated vaccine should receive a booster.

Coronavirus infections have been reported in more than 210 countries and territories since the first cases were identified in central China two years ago.

More than 267.28 million people have been infected and nearly 5.6 million have died, according to a Reuters tally.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the world was not on track to meet vaccination targets and that Omicron illustrated the "perilous situation" the world was in.

Britain was struggling to enforce tougher restrictions to slow the spread of Omicron after revelations about alleged lockdown parties at Prime Minister Boris Johnson's residence provoked an outcry over hypocrisy.

Johnson apologised in parliament for a video showing [staff laughing](#) about a party in Downing Street during a 2020 Christmas COVID lockdown when such festivities were banned for the population.

World stock markets stalled at [two-week highs](#) on Thursday as increased restrictions in parts of the world to contain the spread of Omicron tempered optimism on the vaccine front.

John Nkengasong, the head of the Africa Centres for Disease Control, said on Thursday the Serum Institute of India (SII), the world's biggest vaccine maker, had let Africa down by pulling out of talks to supply vaccines.

[SII](#) did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

Slovakia, with a population of 5.5 million, has been severely hit by the latest wave of the pandemic, forcing it to revert again to lockdowns while hospitals fill up.

It has come up with a [novel way](#) to boost low inoculation rates - to give cash handouts of up \$340 to people over 60 who get their shots.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 FDA expands Pfizer booster to 16yr-olds</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-business-health-coronavirus-vaccine-671cbe9ecf2a5e2c167f4188b5a50e07">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-business-health-coronavirus-vaccine-671cbe9ecf2a5e2c167f4188b5a50e07</a>
GIST	<p>The U.S. is expanding COVID-19 boosters, ruling that 16- and 17-year-olds can get a third dose of Pfizer's vaccine.</p> <p>The U.S. and many other nations already were urging adults to get booster shots to pump up immunity that can wane months after vaccination, calls that intensified with the discovery of the worrisome new omicron variant.</p> <p>On Thursday, the Food and Drug Administration gave emergency authorization for 16- and 17-year-olds to get a third dose of the vaccine made by Pfizer and its partner BioNTech -- if it's been six months since their last shot.</p> <p>"Vaccination and getting a booster when eligible, along with other preventive measures like masking and avoiding large crowds and poorly ventilated spaces, remain our most effective methods for fighting COVID-19," Dr. Janet Woodcock, acting FDA commissioner, said in a statement.</p> <p>There's one more step: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention must formally recommend the boosters for this age group and a decision is expected soon.</p> <p>The Pfizer vaccine is the only option in the U.S. for anyone younger than 18, either for initial vaccination or for use as a booster. It's not yet clear if or when teens younger than 16 might need a third Pfizer dose.</p> <p>"The booster vaccination increases the level of immunity and dramatically improves protection against COVID-19 in all age groups studied so far," BioNTech CEO Ugur Sahin said in a statement.</p> <p>Vaccinations for children as young as 5 just began last month, using special low-dose Pfizer shots. By this week, about 5 million 5- to 11-year-olds had gotten a first dose.</p> <p>The extra-contagious delta variant is causing nearly all COVID-19 infections in the U.S., and in much of the world. It's not yet clear how vaccines will hold up against the new and markedly different omicron mutant. But there's strong evidence that boosters offer a jump in protection against delta-caused infections, currently the biggest threat.</p> <p>Complicating the decision to extend boosters to 16- and 17-year-olds is that the Pfizer shot -- and a similar vaccine made by Moderna -- have been linked to a rare side effect. Called myocarditis, it's a type of heart inflammation seen mostly in younger men and teen boys.</p> <p>The FDA said rising COVID-19 cases in the U.S. mean the benefits of boosters greatly outweighed the potential risk from the rare side effect, especially as the coronavirus itself can cause more serious heart inflammation.</p> <p>Health officials in Israel, which already gives boosters to teens, have said the side effect continues to be rare with third doses.</p>



	A U.S. study this week offered additional reassurance. Researchers from children's hospitals around the country checked medical records and found the rare side effect usually is mild and people recover quickly. The research was published Monday in the journal Circulation.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Burkina Faso president fires PM</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/africa-violence-south-sudan-west-africa-burkina-faso-ed81fc4aa1650300ec9c1587e387e427">https://apnews.com/article/africa-violence-south-sudan-west-africa-burkina-faso-ed81fc4aa1650300ec9c1587e387e427</a>
GIST	<p>JUBA, South Sudan (AP) — Burkina Faso's prime minister has been fired amid escalating jihadi violence that's killed thousands and displaced more than 1 million people.</p> <p>President Roch Marc Christian Kabore sacked his prime minister amid weeks of anti-government protests in which demonstrators have criticized his government's inability to stem extremist attacks by al-Qaida and the Islamic State across the West African nation.</p> <p>Last month saw the deadliest violence against the country's security forces in recent memory, with more than 50 gendarmes killed in the Sahel region.</p> <p>Prime Minister Christophe Joseph Marie Dabire was removed as a result of the president's commitment to setting up a "tighter and more cohesive government," Communications Minister Ousseni Tamboura, told The Associated Press. He didn't know when a new government would be formed, he said.</p> <p>According to Burkina Faso law, the prime minister's resignation requires the entire government to resign. The outgoing Cabinet ministers will remain in their positions until a new one is formed, said the president's statement.</p> <p>Dabire became prime minister in 2019 and was reappointed after Kabore won reelection to a second term in November, 2020. Kabore's action to get rid of his prime minister is part of a last-ditch effort to regain political and military control in the face of plummeting popularity, said Alexandre Raymakers, senior Africa analyst at Verisk Maplecroft, a risk consultancy.</p> <p>"Kabore is running out of political options and his decision to replace the prime minister will likely only provide a short-term reprieve," he said.</p> <p>As the government struggles to quell civil unrest and bolster the military, Burkina Faso is also facing a growing humanitarian crisis. More than 1.6 million people — out of a population of 20 million — are facing hunger with hundreds of thousands predicted to be on the brink of starvation next year, according to the latest food security report by the government and U.N. agencies.</p> <p>As the violence cuts off swaths of land, civilians are unable to farm and aid groups are having a harder time delivering food assistance, sparking concern that hunger will grow.</p> <p>"What worries the World Food Program the most is the increase of the population classified in emergency food insecurity. It will increase by 27% over a year to nearly 440,000 people who cannot afford to face a new shock," said Antoine Renard, WFP's country director in Burkina Faso.</p> <p>"It is the third year in a row that Burkina Faso faces such large figures," he said. "It reflects the deepening of the conflict and the regional Sahel crisis."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Rapid Covid tests availability unrealized</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/09/rapid-coronavirus-tests-availability/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/09/rapid-coronavirus-tests-availability/</a>
GIST	President Biden announced last week that rapid <a href="#">coronavirus</a> tests were a pillar of <a href="#">his plan</a> to fight the new and <a href="#">potentially more transmissible omicron variant</a> , now confirmed in at least 21 states.

But nearly a year into his administration, the availability of low-cost coronavirus tests that return results in as little as 15 minutes remains an oft-promised but still unrealized capability in large swaths of the country — a far cry from [the situation in countries such as Britain and Singapore](#) where the government purchased the kits last spring and distributed millions of them free or at low cost.

Many people in the United States [cannot find the tests online or at retail stores](#) because the kits are often out of stock — and when they do see them, consumers may be unable to buy them in quantity because of the cost, typically around \$25 for a packet of two. That makes it impractical to urge all Americans to incorporate the tests into their daily routines — especially before going to work, [traveling](#) or gathering indoors with family members and friends — to avoid spreading the virus unintentionally, as many health experts now advise.

In some states, supply issues have also affected the [tests' availability for schoolchildren](#) and residents of long-term care facilities, homeless shelters and prisons. A recurring theme on a call of state health officers last week “was the challenge at the state level with obtaining rapid tests,” said Nirav D. Shah, director of Maine’s Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Maine, Kansas, North Carolina and Washington officials are among those who have complained of difficulty procuring sufficient test kits and the need for more federal funds to help states purchase them.

The scattershot availability and high cost of the rapid tests are the latest issues in a nearly two-year saga of stumbles that have plagued coronavirus testing in the United States across two administrations, undercutting efforts to curb the spread of the virus and keep schools and businesses open safely. One of the biggest mistakes early in the pandemic was underestimating the impact of asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic spreaders. Rapid tests can identify such people and if widely used, help stop chains of transmission that turn viral flare-ups into conflagrations, say health experts.

While the Biden administration arrived late to its commitment to increase the U.S. supply of rapid tests, it has taken steps to increase their availability in recent months, [including investing billions of dollars](#) to buy the tests directly from manufacturers. Public health experts welcome those initiatives, but say more needs to be done.

“Our testing infrastructure has been horrendous since the first day of the pandemic,” said Eric Topol, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, adding that the nation’s production of diagnostic tools has consistently lagged the need for them.

Biden announced a plan last week to make the tests more affordable and accessible as part of his strategy to fight the new variant by requiring private insurers to reimburse consumers for their purchases. For those without such coverage, the president said the government would provide 50 million free tests starting this month to convenient locations around the country, including federally qualified health centers and urban and rural community centers.

But Topol called the plan a “non-starter,” because it requires consumers to lay out money for the tests and then submit receipts to insurers to be paid back. And he argued that for the strategy to be successful, many more free tests need to be made available to those covered through public programs or without insurance.

“There needs to be a revamped regulatory approach to get more and better tests out at scale, immediately, and free distribution to all Americans,” Topol said.

Administration officials defend their approach, saying they are taking aggressive steps to build the nation’s capacity, citing \$3 billion in new investments this fall focused on purchases of rapid tests. As a result of those efforts, the U.S. supply of the over-the-counter tests has risen from 40 million a month in August to more than 200 million for December, and it continues to grow, they said. The government has prioritized about 3 million rapid tests a week for the nation’s 15,000 long-term care facilities, and free testing in more than 10,000 pharmacies.

A White House official also noted that over-the-counter tests are just one part of the nation's testing infrastructure, saying the number of PCR tests, typically performed in a health-care setting, has increased.

In addition, the Food and Drug Administration [moved last month to further streamline its review process](#) for numerous tests, including at-home ones, after months of criticism that its requirements were onerous, building on steps it first took in March. Yet despite these efforts, the United States has continued to lag European and Asian countries, which have been much more aggressive in buying, subsidizing and distributing tests. A senior administration official said government subsidies and large purchasing agreements are the main drivers of test availability in other countries.

"Our approach is not to send everyone a test ... independent of their need or desire to get tested," White House Covid-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said at a briefing Tuesday in response to a reporter's question about whether the United States would follow the British model to send kits to every household. "Everyone in America has access to free testing in an efficient and effective way, and we've developed multiple access points for free testing."

Zients said the administration would continue its efforts to make the tests more affordable and available.

"There are now 13 [rapid] tests approved from the FDA," he said. "That's up from none at the beginning of the administration. And that leads to innovation. That leads to prices coming down [through] competition. So we're going to continue to increase the access to free testing to everyone in America."

In the meantime, consumer demand for rapid tests far exceeds their availability in many places. When New Hampshire officials [announced Nov. 29](#) that residents could apply to get rapid tests delivered free to their door, about 800,000 of the 1 million available were gone in less than 24 hours, according to federal health officials.

The trial [program](#), which began in April to evaluate how to use rapid tests across the country, was available in select counties with high infection rates in states including Hawaii, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Washington. The pilot by the National Institutes of Health and the CDC has distributed just under 5.5 million free rapid tests made by Quidel, and is ending in a few weeks, said Rachael Fleurence, special assistant to NIH Director Francis Collins for covid-19 diagnostics. "We're out of budget," she said.

Experts say testing — using both rapid and PCR tests administered by health-care providers — is certain to become more crucial as scientists and government officials [race to get more information on the transmissibility of omicron](#) and its [ability to evade vaccines](#). Regulators say they're confident that most of the rapid tests authorized in the United States will detect omicron infections because they do not rely on the spike protein, [where many of its mutations](#) have been identified.

Additional testing will also be integral to Biden's push to have private and public sector employers require their workforces [undergo regular testing](#) if they are not vaccinated, as well as "test to stay" school policies that enable children potentially exposed to infections to remain in class if they test negative.

If the goal is to encourage more people to act responsibly to protect one another, distributing millions of free tests would make that more far likely, said Carole Moss, a patient-safety advocate who lost her 15-year-old son due to delayed diagnosis of an antibiotic-resistant infection.

"We all need multiple self-test kits weekly that are free, to entice everyone to test," she said. "Often, at \$23 for two tests, many families don't have the extra cash to pay for the tests in advance."

Some state officials agree more needs to be done, citing their own difficulty obtaining tests that are supposed to go to the most vulnerable Americans.

Kansas health officials say they ordered 1,500 boxes of over-the-counter rapid coronavirus test kits in October to share with homeless shelters and groups that help migrant workers and other communities who

don't have access to testing locations, but "we've only received 350" of the boxes, said deputy health officer Joan Duwve.

Maine officials say they've ordered tens of thousands of Abbott's rapid at-home tests through the end of the year for schools, group homes, long-term care facilities and prisons, but have not received them in a timely fashion. As a result, they are prioritizing rapid tests for schools, a Walgreens program that offers free tests, and facilities experiencing outbreaks, said Shah, the state's CDC director. He said he has one staff person whose full-time job now is procuring tests; the state is also working with another manufacturer to diversify supply.

Abbott spokesman John Koval said the company scaled up manufacturing of its BinaxNOW test kits since the CDC re-prioritized testing at the end of July as the delta variant exploded in the United States. Abbott now produces more than 50 million rapid tests a month, and has hired additional workers in Maine and Illinois, he said.

#### **'A missed opportunity'**

Biden campaigned on his commitment to jump-start coronavirus testing, unveiling a "Pandemic Testing Board" proposal in June 2020 that he compared to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's War Production Board, which [oversaw](#) the rapid conversion of civilian factories to make supplies for the U.S. military during World War II.

On his first full day as president, Biden [signed an executive order officially creating the testing board](#), vowing that he would put the "full force of the federal government" behind churning out more diagnostics after criticizing his predecessor for failing to build that capacity.

But the testing board's operations fell far short of that vision, said three current and two former administration officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal meetings. Roosevelt's war-supplies board included multiple cabinet members and empowered the chairman to overrule government agencies. Biden's panel became another cog in the federal bureaucracy, deferring decisions to officials in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), failing to argue for long-term investments and competing for influence with other groups working on the virus response, the current and former officials said.

"It wasn't clear whether they were setting testing policy or just listening to everyone's ideas for policies," said one former health official. "The board may have been a good idea, but in practice, it was a real missed opportunity."

Carole Johnson, whom Biden named as the nation's coronavirus testing czar last year, defended the board's record in an October interview, saying it had been split into groups focused on testing supplies and testing policy.

"It is a real coordinating function and body, but ... because some of the decision-making is regulatory, it rests with the various agencies," said Johnson, who is considering leaving the role to become administrator of the federal Health Resources and Services Administration, a change first reported by Politico and confirmed by two officials.

Another White House official said the board deferred to the HHS because Congress appropriated testing money to that agency, but that the board helps coordinate testing efforts planned across the government.

Separately, a group of Biden administration health-agency officials approached the White House last spring — before the arrival of the delta variant in the United States — urging it to purchase millions of the rapid tests, according to five senior administration officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to share internal discussions. They warned that without doing so, the kits would remain hard to find and exorbitantly priced.

But White House officials never followed up on the proposal. Back then, they were focused on vaccination as the path out of the pandemic and believed that breakthrough infections were rare in vaccinated people — a notion that the delta variant would turn on its head. Administration officials also thought the price of the tests was too high and feared such a purchase would lock other manufacturers out of the market.

Guidance from the CDC in May affirmed the thinking that once Americans were vaccinated they need not worry about testing. It advised people that once they were vaccinated, they did not need to get tested even if exposed to the virus, unless they were experiencing symptoms. Officials point to that guidance as a turning point, arguing it dismantled incentives for manufacturers or the government to increase the production of tests.

As the delta variant stampeded through the South over the summer, causing a growing number of breakthrough infections, the CDC would change that guidance. By that point, however, valuable time had been lost.

“We did not prioritize rapid tests the way we did vaccines,” said Neil J. Sehgal, assistant professor of health policy and management at the University of Maryland School of Public Health. “Both the former and current administration banked on vaccines ending the pandemic.”

Faced with a huge falloff in sales just before the delta variant took hold, meanwhile, test manufacturer Abbott laid off thousands of workers and told employees to destroy excess test kits in June and July, the New York Times first reported.

“We did this year what we did early in the pandemic, which was put enormous effort into scaling up our U.S. manufacturing facilities because we know people depend on BinaxNOW and Abbott,” Abbott spokesman Koval said in an email, adding that the company did not destroy finished products and kept usable components “so that we could have them in the event that we needed to scale back up, which is exactly what’s happening now.”

“We rehired workers, reassembled manufacturing lines and critical machinery, and asked our suppliers to work with us again to beat back delta and prepare for the winter months,” Koval wrote.

Two industry officials said the testing response to the delta variant might have been more robust had the administration stockpiled tests in the months when demand softened. Instead, when the White House committed to investing in the rapid tests, manufacturers had to spend weeks ramping production back up, hiring employees and opening new plants, said the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the issue candidly.

“It would have been good if when we saw a drop in demand this summer, there had been a more aggressive plan to shore up the supply side to make sure we were prepared if the surge came back,” one of the officials said.

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HEADLINE	12/09 Long Covid destroying careers
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/09/long-covid-work-unemployed/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/09/long-covid-work-unemployed/</a>
GIST	<p>Before the <a href="#">coronavirus</a> ruined her plans, Tiffany Patino expected to be back at work by now. She and her boyfriend intended to move out of a basement in suburban Maryland, where his grandmother lets them stay for free, so they could raise their infant son in a place of their own. Maybe get a new car.</p> <p>But Patino got sick with covid-19 more than a year ago. Instead of getting better, <a href="#">chronic exhaustion</a> and other symptoms persisted, delaying her return to a restaurant job and swamping her goal of financial independence. After reaching what she calls her “hell-iversary” last month, Patino remains unable to rejoin the workforce. With no income of her own, she’s exhausted, racked with pain, short of breath, forgetful, bloated, swollen, depressed.</p>

At 28 years old, she can barely take her baby to the playground. “I go on a walk, and I have to use the stroller like a walker,” she said. “Whatever life I have right now, it’s more like surviving. I’m not living my dream. I’m living a nightmare.”

Across America, [many](#) of the nearly 50 million people infected with the [coronavirus continue to suffer](#) from some persistent symptoms, with a smaller subset experiencing such unbearable fatigue and other maladies that they can’t work, forcing them to drop out of the workforce, abandon careers and rack up huge debts.

Hard data is not available and estimates vary widely, but based on published studies and their own experience treating patients, several medical specialists said 750,000 to 1.3 million patients likely remain so sick for extended periods that they can’t return to the workforce full time.

Long covid is testing not just the medical system, but also government [safety nets](#) that are not well suited to identifying and supporting people with a newly emerging chronic disease that has no established diagnostic or treatment plan. Insurers are denying coverage for some tests, the public disability system is hesitant to approve many claims, and even people with long-term disability insurance say they are struggling to get benefits.

Employers are also being tested, as they must balance their desire to get workers back on the job full time with the realities of a slow recovery for many patients.

“They are suffering in dramatic ways, and in ways that have altered their lives and placed them in financial peril,” said Harlan Krumholz, a cardiologist and scientist at Yale University and Yale New Haven Hospital.

The Washington Post interviewed more than 30 people around the country experiencing the sudden financial slide caused by the long form of the disease. They have been laid off and fired, quit jobs, shuttered businesses. They described falling behind on rent, mortgages and car payments. Some worried about losing their housing.

[Depression and anxiety](#) that are part of the brutal mix of long covid symptoms are exacerbated by despair over vanishing income. From health-care professionals and small-business operators to government employees and warehouse supervisors, the patients expressed fears about never being able to return to work.

Many people with long covid, often referred to as “long haulers,” experience mild symptoms to begin with, then get stuck with months of chronic fatigue, shortness of breath, confusion and memory loss, erratic and racing heartbeats, radical spikes in blood pressure, painful rashes, shooting pains and gastrointestinal problems.

The government calls it post-acute sequelae of SARS-CoV-2, or PASC. The National Institutes of Health is spending \$1.15 billion to study the syndrome. The symptoms sometimes subside, lulling long haulers into a false sense of relief, only to come roaring back after performing simple chores like vacuuming a living room or raking leaves.

Patino is afraid to carry her son for too long, worried she will drop him. She takes naps every day. If she did return to work as a server or host in a restaurant, she fears she would quickly get fired for missing work.

“I just feel so old. I feel so tired. When you are dealing with so many symptoms, every day it’s like a lottery pick,” Patino said.

Doctors treating long haulers say the symptoms cut across race and class lines.



“I have hundreds of patients who have had to take time off for long periods of time, quit their jobs, or get fired from their jobs, or take lesser-paying jobs” because of long covid, said Janna Friedly, vice chair for clinical affairs at the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine at the University of Washington School of Medicine, where she and her team are helping long haulers build strength and return to work.

On top of the loss of income, some patients lose their employer-sponsored health insurance when they can’t work. “I’ve seen patients who have gone from fully insured to not being able to come back and see me in clinic in the middle of our treatment because they have lost their job and no longer can afford to seek care,” Friedly said.

Even for those who do have insurance, treating long covid can be unusually complicated and costly, since it’s a new disease without an established diagnostic or treatment plan and coverage for certain tests may be denied.

Health insurance companies, citing the blizzard of tests being ordered, say they are waiting for data-driven protocols to emerge so they can match insurance coverage with the best testing and treatment strategies for long covid.

“In many cases, the kitchen sink approach is not helping,” said Michael Sherman, chief medical officer of Point32Health, a nonprofit insurance company in Massachusetts formed from the merger of Harvard-Pilgrim and Tufts health plans. Until research is published into what tests and treatments work, he said, “there’s a lack of evidence that anyone can look to.”

#### **‘This virus took my career’**

The cognitive and emotional impacts also make it difficult for patients to navigate the bureaucratic tangles required to keep health insurance and file disability claims after a job loss.

John Buccellato, 64, an emergency medicine doctor at an urgent care clinic on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, was hospitalized with the virus in March 2020, in the same hospital where his mother died of covid.

In a matter of days, he went from treating patients at a busy clinic to being engulfed in a health crisis as covid attacked his lungs and vascular system. Severe cognitive and emotional strain left him unable to manage his day-to-day affairs.

Overwhelmed by brain fog and the sense of loss over his career, he frequently sobbed on the phone as he described his struggles in an interview, including the loss of his employer-sponsored insurance.

A clinical neuropsychologist treating him, Gudrun Lange, said Buccellato experienced brain bleeds and a tumor. He repeats himself and seems easily confused.

“He starts getting emotional, involuntary crying, and there’s nothing he can do about it,” she said.

Buccellato said he has tens of thousands of dollars in unpaid medical bills that accumulated when he first lost his health insurance. He has some property and savings, but no weekly cash flow, he said. He signed up for COBRA, which provides a continuation of health insurance after a job loss, but after congressionally approved waivers that made it free expired in September, it now costs \$922 a month, he said.

Garage operators briefly impounded his Lexus because he could no longer pay the \$400 a month to park the car, he said. Now it’s on the street, accumulating tickets.

Buccellato said he recognizes his career is prematurely over, but he can’t figure out how to dig himself out of his worsening financial predicament. A lawyer helped him file a disability claim with the Social Security Administration, which a member of his support team said was recently successful. Because he left work for medical reasons, he was not eligible for unemployment insurance.



“This virus took my career away. I can’t do anything in the medical field right now. Nobody is going to hire me,” he said.

Other patients who experienced a similar plunge in income with the loss of their professional careers described their new reliance on government aid.

Chimere Smith, 39, a middle school teacher in Baltimore who has [testified](#) in Congress about covid’s impact on her life, has not worked since she caught the virus in the early weeks of the pandemic. She has blown through \$12,000 in savings and is on [food stamps](#).

She said the sense of loss is profound because she worked her way up from a childhood in a poor area of Washington, D.C. Before she got sick, she had hoped to become a school principal.

“I was following the trajectory of what I was told for years to be successful and Black in the world,” she said, “and to have it all taken away by illness is a loss that I don’t think I’ll ever recover from. Even using the word devastation doesn’t really capture the full scope of my experience.”

She also plans to apply for disability assistance.

But many patients applying for disability insurance benefits are initially denied and require lengthy appeals, according to patients, doctors and lawyers, in part because the medical community is still grappling with how to diagnose their symptoms.

The Social Security Administration said in an email that it has received 16,000 covid-related disability claims since December 2020, but the agency would not disclose how many of those were approved or denied.

Patients, advocates and lawyers said private disability insurers, which offer long-term disability coverage through employee benefit plans, have also been denying many claims.

For individuals who said they can’t work, the denials are frustrating. Michael Heidenberg, 48, of White Plains, N.Y., was unable to return to his \$60,000 a year job as an academic adviser at Berkeley College, a regional for-profit college that kept him on for four months beyond the 12 weeks of unpaid leave required by the Family Medical Leave Act requirement. The college said it could not keep him on the books longer because it would create a hardship for his department, he said.

Heidenberg had purchased long-term disability insurance through his former employer, which promised a benefit of \$3,100 a month, up to \$150,000.

But Reliance Standard, the insurance carrier, recently denied his first application, saying he could do his job sitting down.

Heidenberg said that does not take into account his inability to concentrate for long periods and the dangerous spikes in his blood pressure since he contracted covid last year. Asked to discuss the denial, Reliance Standard said it would not comment on an individual claimant.

While he prepares for an appeal, Heidenberg said he and his wife, Alexis, are trying to figure out how to keep their apartment, which costs \$1,700 a month, and cover COBRA health insurance, which is \$1,200. He opted for COBRA over Medicaid or the Affordable Care Act exchanges because COBRA covers all the doctors he needs, he said.

“Finding doctors who are well-versed in treating post-covid patients has been incredibly difficult,” Heidenberg said.

Still, his COBRA eligibility will expire in March 2022 and he will need to find new insurance. Mike and Alexis set up a GoFundMe account, which has raised \$12,000. Alexis receives \$988 a month in federal disability benefits because of a fibromyalgia diagnosis in 2012. That is currently their only income.

If they have to sell their apartment, they fear they will be priced out of White Plains, where they both grew up. Heidenberg expects his financial problems will get worse.

“It’s just this incredibly scary freight train coming right at us,” Heidenberg said. “You blame yourself. I was the primary breadwinner, and now we’re struggling because I got sick.”

In Kaufman, Tex., a small town 20 miles outside of Dallas, Angie Smith, 44, has slipped behind on \$750-a-month payments on her Nissan Frontier pickup truck, which she bought when she was making more than \$50,000 a year as an orthodontist assistant.

She said she was laid off in March 2020. She got covid eight months later and has been plagued by fatigue, shortness of breath, joint pain, and spikes in body temperature ever since.

Unemployment checks that kept her financially afloat ended in September.

She said she had \$150 in her checking account in mid-November and \$1,400 in rent due in December. Friends from church have helped her hunt for jobs she can do over the phone from home.

“If I lose my house, then I could possibly set up my computer at someone’s house. If I lose my truck, I can still work from home,” she said. “I have so many of these scenarios going on in my head, that I don’t know what to do.”

Nearly all of the patients interviewed by The Post said they wanted to return to work but could not figure out how to get back on the path to productivity.

“Employers are not used to dealing with this kind of work situation. Patients are often told, ‘Just come back when you’re 100 percent,’ which could be a really long time out,” said Greg Vanichkachorn, a family physician and occupational medicine specialist at the Mayo Clinic who is treating long haul patients.

Employers and patients need to understand that many long haulers should return to work on a limited, part-time basis, perhaps working from home, while they slowly work on building strength, he said.

Seattle resident Eileen Hood thought she was ready to begin earning money again.

Hood caught covid in October 2020, forcing her this year to close the small business she had run with a friend for 15 years, selling wigs, specialized clothing and other needs for cancer patients. Hood’s attempt to return to the job she loved ended in frustration.

“Forty minutes into my last wig-fitting, with a lovely lady, I just simply did not have enough air or energy to finish,” she said.

The \$70,000 per year she drew from the shop has evaporated, cutting her family’s income in half.

She is 53 years old and wants to get back to work. Hood said she went to a job interview in October but was forced to cancel her appointment for the second interview in November.

“I went out and raked some leaves and made dinner for my family, and the next day, I couldn’t get out of bed,” she said. “It’s the roller coaster of living with long covid.”

**Feeling ‘worthless’**

At the onset of the lockdowns in March 2020, Patino lost her job as a server at Firebirds Wood Fired Grill in suburban Maryland. Her boyfriend was laid off from another restaurant around the same time. “We had to sign up for unemployment, and I was pregnant,” Patino said.

Two months after the September birth of her baby, Leon, she tested positive for covid.

Her symptoms were moderate, but she could no longer nurse her baby. She was first told she was probably suffering from postpartum depression, she said. She went for a second opinion and staff found signs of the classic “ground-glass” pneumonia in her lungs, she said.

“Almost a month later, right before Christmas, I was still feeling crappy, still feeling tired,” she said. By January, she went back to the hospital and was told she might be a “long hauler.”

“The doctor’s like, ‘In a few months, by March, by April, by the summer, you should be much better,’” Patino said.

But as summer passed into fall, with no more unemployment checks and winter approaching, her symptoms persisted, some of them strange: “I got my taste back, and smell is still iffy. It comes and goes. I will smell smoke, I will smell gasoline, sometimes I smell feces.”

Patino said she endures an isolated and depressing existence, knowing that many people are returning to normal, while her plans remain on hold. She has considered trying an office job where she could work while seated, but worries she would have to call in sick too often. Getting an apartment and a new car to replace their 2007 Kia remain out of reach, she said.

“I just feel like kind of a worthless person,” she said. “I can’t even do something like taking care of my child, cooking dinner, doing laundry, and typical stay at home mom stuff.”

With long covid, she said, “my world shattered, and everything just came crumbling down.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/08 Amtrak worker shortage slows recovery</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2021/12/08/amtrak-worker-shortage-service/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2021/12/08/amtrak-worker-shortage-service/</a>
GIST	<p>The landmark infrastructure package approved last month positioned Amtrak to pursue entering new cities and to tackle long-delayed maintenance projects. But amid its biggest boost in history, the carrier faces an immediate crisis that threatens service: a scarcity of railroad workers.</p> <p>Amtrak is struggling to hire and retain workers amid a national labor shortage, down 1,500 people since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. It has left the railroad unable to resume pre-pandemic service levels, expand dining services to some trains or launch long-planned routes.</p> <p>The intercity passenger railroad is operating about 80 percent of its normal schedule after deep reductions last year. Those levels of service, however, could be reduced next month when the railroad is set to enforce a vaccination policy, which the company says could lead to the termination of 6 percent of its workforce.</p> <p>Service cuts could be announced weeks after President Biden signed a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill that puts \$66 billion into rail, which Amtrak planned to use for expansion and tackling a backlog of projects. The cash infusion has created the most substantial growth opportunity in Amtrak’s 50 years of existence, coming alongside economic conditions that simultaneously threaten to diminish the system.</p> <p>“We’ve spent decades trying to get this level of political and public support for train service. Now we have it, and the most immediate way to get the public excited is to add service where it already exists,” said Jim Mathews, president and CEO of the Rail Passengers Association. “We’re not going to be able to do that. And that’s a real shame.”</p>

Amtrak has stepped up recruitment, but acknowledges challenges in finding and retaining workers. The passenger railroad is competing with other railroads to lure experienced train engineers and mechanics, while also looking for cooks, cleaners and other service personnel in a market where hotels and restaurants also are stretched thin.

Freight railroads CSX and Norfolk Southern also say labor constraints are affecting service.

The industry, which cut positions to reshape operations before the coronavirus struck, endured additional staffing reductions during the pandemic. Railroad companies that employed 160,500 people in January 2020 were down to 142,500 last month, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“Just as other industries have seen, it’s a tough labor market,” said Jessica Kahanek, a spokeswoman for the Association of American Railroads. In the first six months of 2021, she said freight railroads handled more than 300,000 trailers and containers each week, on average — about 30,000 more than in previous months without major growth in the workforce.

The infrastructure package puts \$66 billion into rail. It could power the biggest expansion in Amtrak’s 50-year history.

For passenger rail, Amtrak emerged from Thanksgiving week — its busiest since the start of the pandemic — carrying about 600,000 passengers. The railroad estimates it will be at 75 percent of normal passenger levels this month after hitting a low of 3 percent early last year. The public’s return to the tracks is putting more pressure on the company to restore trips.

“We are seeing some impacts of going back to full schedule. If we were fully staffed, we would be able to offer more schedule, where right now we’re unable to do that,” said Qiana Spain, Amtrak’s executive vice president of human resources.

Amtrak said crew shortages have not led to train cancellations as has occurred for some airlines this year. The railroad said it is not promising customers more trips than it can handle.

“We’ve been really monitoring that very closely to make sure that we have the right operational plan,” Spain said.

The potential terminations of unvaccinated workers on Jan. 4 are Amtrak’s most immediate concern. Chief executive William J. Flynn told staff members last month the railroad is preparing for temporary service reductions as about 6 percent of its 17,000 employees were not yet compliant with the policy.

Amtrak has not said where it’s looking at cuts, but industry and labor leaders say the most likely scenario is that some long-distance routes that cross the United States could temporarily go from daily service to three times a week. Rural areas are most likely to be hit, they say, in part because vaccination rates are lower and crews are smaller.

The worker shortage is also threatening the launch of new service that has been in the works for years. In Virginia, officials were expecting two new routes this year — one to Norfolk and one to Roanoke — but said launch dates are postponed until next year.

Haley Glynn, a spokeswoman with the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, blamed the delay on the nationwide labor shortage, although she said preparation work continues.

“All of the behind-the-scenes work is happening,” she said in late September as Amtrak extended service to downtown Richmond. “But [Amtrak] has had to change the schedules until they get all the labor in place.”

Industry leaders said despite the labor issues, Amtrak is positioned to continue pursuing plans for expansion and infrastructure improvements with the new federal aid. Some of those projects, including the replacement of old tunnels in the Northeast Corridor, already are in the works, while proposals for new routes are in early planning stages, giving Amtrak years to hire and train workers.

In the short term, replacing key workers — such as locomotive engineers or train conductors — is difficult as safety protocols call for workers who already are familiar with routes to run trains.

John R. Feltz, a railroad division director with the Transport Workers Union of America, which represents mechanics, coach cleaners and waitstaff at Amtrak, said in his nearly 50-year career in the industry he's never seen such a scarcity of job applicants.

"These are good middle-class jobs. The wages are very good. The benefits are very good. They have railroad retirement, which pays more than Social Security," said Feltz, a fourth-generation railroad worker. "For some reason, people really don't want to work the different shifts that we have. They don't want to work on weekends."

Most railroad jobs don't require a college degree but some call for employees to work odd schedules and to be away from home for days. A lead service attendant in a train diner makes up to \$70,000, plus tips, while a locomotive engineer earns \$100,800. Spain said Amtrak is weighing incentives and new benefits to lure workers and retain existing employees.

The carrier stopped hiring early in the pandemic as it weathered the health crisis, seeing many workers leave as it implemented furloughs, reduced pay and froze retirement benefits. About 520 workers took a voluntary separation offer.

As it restored more train operations this year and brought back pre-pandemic benefits, Amtrak was left scrambling for workers in every part of the company. It has partnered with unions to launch apprenticeship programs and is trying to expedite hiring processes.

But rebuilding the workforce will take time. Engineers, for example, undergo a three-month training at an Amtrak facility in Wilmington, Del., followed by 18 to 24 months of training to be qualified on the territory where they will be operating. Assistant conductors undergo at least a six-month training to be fully qualified.

Amtrak said it is hiring about 200 people for both positions this fiscal year.

Rail advocates say they hope Amtrak figures out the formula to get workers onboard as new rail funding begins to pour in to address a repair backlog, improve stations, replace old trains and create a path to modernize the busy Washington-to-Boston corridor. The infrastructure funding could also overhaul Amtrak's service map, which has remained nearly unchanged during a period when the nation gained 120 million people. Amtrak's long-term plan is to bring its trains to 160 new communities.

Mathews said the easiest way to make progress is adding service — a task that's not possible if the railroad can't find adequate staff.

"It's hard to point a finger at Amtrak because they're just swept up in a national phenomenon," Mathews said. "And it's just unfortunate because we're in a place now where we really need those folks to stay on the trains."

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HEADLINE	12/09 China economy threatened by debt issues
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/article/evergrande-debt-crisis.html">https://www.nytimes.com/article/evergrande-debt-crisis.html</a>

Every once in a while, a company grows so big and messy that governments fear what would happen to the broader economy if it were to fail. In China, [Evergrande](#), a sprawling real estate developer, is that company.

[Evergrande](#) has the distinction of being the world's most debt-saddled developer and has been on life support for months. Now, it looks to be facing the biggest corporate restructuring in Asia.

Fitch Ratings, a credit ratings firm, has said the Chinese developer is in default of its obligations. [Evergrande has said](#) that officials from several state-backed institutions had joined a risk committee that would help the company restructure itself.

Evergrande is a huge real estate empire with millions of apartments in hundreds of cities across China. It also has more than \$300 billion in financial obligations, hundreds of unfinished residential buildings and angry suppliers who have shut down construction sites. Things got so bad that the company paid its overdue bills with unfinished properties and asked employees [to lend it money](#).

What happens next could reverberate through China's economy, affecting home buyers, more than [3.8 million jobs](#), and hundreds of thousands of employees who work for the company.

Observers are now watching to see how Beijing handles the next chapter of Evergrande for what it says about the country's intentions to clean up the country's corporate sector by letting "debt bombs" like Evergrande collapse.

#### **Did Evergrande default?**

For months, Evergrande kept the financial markets on edge as it narrowly averted default several times by making 11th-hour payments on its bonds. But under mounting pressure and with no cash to keep things going, Evergrande said on Dec. 3 that it was unlikely to continue to meet its financial obligations.

The next week, after another deadline on two bond payments came and went with no sign of payment and no word from Evergrande, Fitch Ratings placed the Chinese developer in its "restricted default" category. The category means that Evergrande had formally defaulted but had not yet entered into any kind of bankruptcy filing, liquidation or other process that would stop its operations.

In the United States and many other places, this would open the door for creditors to take legal action to try to get their money back. But Chinese government officials have closely managed previous corporate meltdowns to make sure they don't spiral out of control, so many investors are waiting to see what plan might emerge.

Evergrande said it would "actively engage" with its foreign creditors to come up with a plan for restructuring — the often long and drawn out process of stripping a company down and selling off its parts to pay everyone off.

Investors could go after assets overseas, but the process could be messy.

"Evergrande is complex and has entities in companies both inside and outside the People's Republic of China," said Daniel Anderson, a partner at the law firm Ropes & Gray in Hong Kong. "There isn't a clean, single legal mechanism that can be implemented to restructure the group. As a result, it will have to be across jurisdictions, which will make it highly complex."

#### **How did Evergrande become such a problem?**

In its glory days a decade ago, [Evergrande](#) sold bottled water, owned China's best professional soccer team and even briefly dabbled in pig farming. It became so big and sprawling that it has a unit that makes electric cars, though it has delayed mass production.

Now Evergrande is seen as a rickety threat to China's biggest banks.

The company, founded in 1996, rode China's epic real estate boom that urbanized large swathes of the country and resulted in nearly [three quarters](#) of household wealth being tied up in housing. This put Evergrande at the center of power in an economy that came to lean on the real estate market for supercharged economic growth.

The company's billionaire founder, Xu Jiayin, is a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, an elite group of politically well-connected advisers. Mr. Xu's connections likely gave creditors more confidence to keep lending money to Evergrande as it grew and expanded into new businesses. Eventually, though, Evergrande ended up with more debt than it could pay off.

In recent years, it has faced lawsuits from home buyers who are still waiting for the completion of apartments they paid for. Suppliers and creditors have claimed hundreds of billions of dollars in outstanding bills. Some have suspended construction on Evergrande projects.

### **Why is the company in so much trouble now?**

Evergrande might have been able to keep going if it weren't for two problems. First, Chinese regulators are cracking down on the reckless borrowing habits of developers. This has forced Evergrande to start selling some of its sprawling business empire, and that's not going so well.

It failed to sell its electric vehicle business, [despite talks](#) with prospective buyers. Some experts said buyers were waiting for a fire sale.

Second, China's [real estate market is slowing](#) and there is less demand for new apartments. The National Institution for Finance and Development, a prominent Beijing think tank, declared the real estate market boom had "shown signs of a turning point," citing weak demand and slowing sales.

That is contributing to [an overall slowdown](#) in China's economic growth, which — in a self-perpetuating cycle — could further erode demand for Evergrande's properties.

Much of the cash that Evergrande has been able to drum up has come from presold apartments that aren't yet completed. Evergrande has nearly 800 projects across China that are unfinished, and as many as 1.6 million people who are still waiting to move into their new homes, according to an estimate from Barclays.

### **Will Chinese regulators step in to save it?**

What happens next is largely in the hands of Chinese government authorities.

For years, many investors gave money to companies like Evergrande because they believed Beijing would always step in with a rescue if things got too shaky. And for decades, the investors were right. But more recently, the authorities have [shown greater willingness](#) to let companies fail in order to rein in China's [unsustainable](#) debt problem.

When it comes to developers, the authorities have until now been resolute about not stepping in. So far this year, at least 11 developers have already defaulted on bond payments.

To emphasize this point, China's central bank has blamed Evergrande's "own poor management and reckless expansion" for its problems and said the crisis was limited to Evergrande. Yi Gang, the central bank governor, has indicated that Evergrande was not likely to get a bailout.

### **How would Evergrande's failure affect China's economy?**

A campaign by the central bank to tame real estate debt and reduce the banking sector's exposure to troubled developers should mean that an Evergrande failure would have less of an impact on China's financial system.

The reality may be more complicated.



Panic from investors and home buyers [could spill over](#) into the real estate market and hit prices, affecting household wealth and confidence. It could also shake global financial markets and make it harder for other Chinese companies to continue to finance their businesses with foreign investment.

Chen Zhiwu, a professor of finance at the University of Hong Kong, said a failure could result in a credit crunch for the entire economy as financial institutions become more risk averse. An Evergrande failure was “not good news to the financial system or the overall economy,” he said.

But not everyone is as pessimistic. Bruce Pang, an economist at China Renaissance Securities, said a default could lay the groundwork for a healthier economy in the future. “If Evergrande were to fail with the fading belief of ‘too big to fail,’ it will prove Beijing’s more tolerant for defaults despite pains and disruption in the short term,” Mr. Pang said.

#### **Should foreign investors be concerned?**

Foreign investors are now worried that the money they are owed may be stuck in China and will be difficult to extract. In any bankruptcy proceeding, they would be low on the list of creditors to get any of the Chinese company’s assets.

Some, however, are more optimistic. China Inc. needs to be able to continue to raise money from foreign investors, so Beijing will make sure that bondholders are able to recover some of their losses, the thinking goes.

Foreign investors are owed \$1.3 billion in U.S. bond payments this month and by April of next year, that figure will rise to \$17 billion, according to [one estimate](#).

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Supply chain upheaval: life-or-death threat</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/business/supply-chain-medical-device-shortages.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/business/supply-chain-medical-device-shortages.html</a>
GIST	<p>For much of this year, Joseph Norwood’s next breath was locked in a zero-sum competition with people eager to upgrade their iPhones.</p> <p>Mr. Norwood has sleep apnea, meaning that he frequently stops breathing while sleeping.</p> <p>A device known as a CPAP — or continuous positive airway pressure machine — can pump air into his body through a face mask while he sleeps, greatly reducing his risk of sudden death.</p> <p>But such machines require computer chips, a component that is in critically short supply amid the <a href="#">Great Supply Chain Disruption</a>. Mr. Norwood waited more than six agonizing months before he received his device.</p> <p>“It felt like forever,” he said. “I haven’t been working. I haven’t been doing much of anything.”</p> <p>Around the world, many of the largest industries are jockeying to secure scarce stocks of computer chips. <a href="#">Automakers have slashed production</a> for a lack of chips, threatening jobs from <a href="#">Japan</a> to <a href="#">Germany</a> to the <a href="#">United States</a>. <a href="#">Apple</a> has cut back on making iPads. <a href="#">Retailers</a> have prepared for a holiday shopping season pockmarked by shortages of must-have electronics.</p> <p>The companies that make computer chips — most of them clustered in Asia — have ramped up production while scrambling to fill orders from their largest customers. That has made purchasing chips exceedingly difficult for smaller companies. One of those niche buyers of chips is ResMed, the San Diego-based company that makes the CPAP that Mr. Norwood finally received last month.</p> <p>“Medical devices are getting starved here,” the company’s chief executive, Michael Farrell, said in an interview. “Do we need one more cellphone? One more electric car? One more cloud-connected refrigerator? Or do we need one more ventilator that gives the gift of breath to somebody?”</p>

ResMed has struggled to buy enough chips, Mr. Farrell said, constraining its ability to make a range of vital equipment — from ventilators used by Covid patients to breathing devices that sustain premature infants.

The company is “producing less than 75 percent of what our customers need,” Mr. Farrell said.

Mr. Farrell has found himself in an uncustomary role: beseeching his suppliers to allocate more of their goods to him so that his company can work through a growing backlog of orders.

This campaign has yet to yield more chips, though it has provided poignant lessons about the priorities at work as the global economy strains to return to normal nearly two years into the pandemic.

“I’m fighting against very big-name automotive companies and cellular communications companies and others who also want more supply,” Mr. Farrell said. “We’re such a small percentage of the total semiconductor chip output that we don’t often get the attention.”

Medical device manufacturers have this year spent an estimated \$6.4 billion on computer chips, according to Gartner, a research firm.

The automotive industry has spent \$49 billion. Makers of wireless communications gadgets like cellphones and tablets have purchased nearly \$170 billion worth of chips — more than 26 times as much as medical device manufacturers, according to Gartner.

The shortages are assailing every industry. But much as airlines prioritize their most frequent fliers in the face of a flight-canceling blizzard, chip makers are in many cases favoring their largest customers, expert say.

“Everyone else is faced with the same struggle,” said Willy C. Shih, an international trade expert at Harvard Business School. “But it is true that if you are Apple or someone who buys a lot, you probably get more attention.”

The shortages are in large part the result of botched efforts to anticipate the economic impact of the pandemic.

As Covid-19 emerged from China in early 2020, it sowed fears of a global recession that would destroy demand for a vast range of products. That prompted major buyers of chips — especially automakers — to slash their orders. In response, semiconductor plants reduced their production.

That proved a colossal mistake. The pandemic shut down restaurants, movie theaters and hotels, while slashing demand for cars. But lockdowns imposed to choke off the virus increased demand for an array of products that use chips, like desktop monitors and printers for newly outfitted home offices.

By the time global industry figured out that demand for chips was surging, it was too late. Adding chip-making capacity requires as much as two years of lead time and billions of dollars.

In North America, Europe and elsewhere, medical device manufacturers are governed by strict product safety standards that limit their flexibility in adapting to trouble. Once a company like ResMed gains regulatory clearance to use a supplier, it cannot simply seek out a new one that might have a ready stock of chips without first going through a time-consuming approval process.

That meant that ResMed had to figure out how to squeeze more chips out of its existing supply chain.

Far from simple components, computer chips come in enormous varieties, each made with multiple parts that are typically made in multiple countries.

Faced with the prospect of getting shut out, Mr. Farrell rooted through his supply chain, identifying the suppliers of his suppliers, in the hopes of persuading them to prioritize ResMed's factories.

Mr. Farrell soon realized that a primary reason that his chip supplier could not meet his demand was that — five levels up the chain — a Taiwanese manufacturer of silicon wafers had exhausted its inventory.

Because that plant could not deliver extra products, the next link in the chain — a company that combines wafers and circuitry — could not produce more of its components. That meant that another company that buys those components and packages them into clusters was unable to make more of them.

And that meant that ResMed's supplier of circuit boards could not buy enough of those clusters, leaving ResMed's factories in Singapore, Sydney and Atlanta short of circuit boards.

Mr. Farrell took it on himself to try to unstick his supply chain. Drawing on government contacts in Australia, where he was born and raised, he set up a conversation with a board member of the wafer company.

In October, during a getaway with his wife in British Columbia to celebrate their anniversary, Mr. Farrell took time out for a Zoom call. The board member introduced Mr. Farrell to another board member in London, who then reached the company's head of sales in San Francisco. Mr. Farrell connected the sales chief of the wafer company with ResMed's president of operations in Singapore.

ResMed's orders amounted to barely 1 percent of the wafer company's output. A mere fraction of 1 percent in additional wafers was enough to satisfy ResMed's needs.

The wafer manufacturer initially agreed to the increase, but then reversed that decision.

"In fact, they reduced our allocation," Mr. Farrell said.

All of this explained why Mr. Norwood was stuck waiting for his CPAP.

Born in Minnesota, Mr. Norwood, 44, has spent his adult life seeking refuge from the bite of winter. He lived in Maui for seven years, and then moved to San Diego in the fall of 2019, working as a waiter at a waterfront hotel restaurant.

Early last year, he was watching a movie with a housemate when he suddenly passed out.

"It was pretty scary," Mr. Norwood recalled. "I woke up and my housemate is tapping me on the shoulder. I was disoriented."

A week later, he blacked out again. His concentration was weakening throughout the day. Short walks winded him.

He stopped working, applying for disability payments.

Early this year, he spent a night in a sleep laboratory at the University of California, San Diego. Doctors observed that his breathing stopped 62 times per hour, while his blood-oxygen level decreased to alarming levels.

When the doctors administered a CPAP, Mr. Norwood's breathing returned to normal. They arranged for him to receive one at home. He looked forward to resuming a normal life.

Yet weeks later, the device had yet to arrive. When Mr. Norwood called his insurance company to inquire, it told him that he was on a waiting list, with no clarity on how long he should expect to wait.

"They said: 'We have no idea. No one is telling us anything,'" Mr. Norwood recalled.

On the web, he learned about the shortage of computer chips. He read a story about an airline pilot who had sleep apnea and was not flying because he had yet to receive his own CPAP. A [massive recall of the devices](#) by a big manufacturer further reduced supply.

“I’m just a waiter trying to bring people food and drinks, and I can’t get a CPAP,” Mr. Norwood said. “If the airplane pilot isn’t getting his, it might be a while before I get mine.”

When he finally received the device in November, it changed his outlook.

“Last night was the best sleep I have had in years,” he said the day after picking it up, adding that he was hoping to return to work.

But the experience had left Mr. Norwood shaken about the realities of who gets what in a time of bewildering shortages.

“It’s so unfortunate how money controls everything,” he said. “Our priorities are really skewed.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Millions brace: student loan payments due</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/09/us-student-loan-crisis-payments">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/09/us-student-loan-crisis-payments</a>
GIST	<p>Jennifer Rae Wilson, a social worker and single mother of three children in Richland, Washington, has struggled with student loan debt since she went back to school and graduated in 2000 – more than two decades ago.</p> <p>Struggling to raise three boys with very little child support, Wilson decided to attend college 10 years after graduating high school to improve her career prospects. She was eventually able to move out of low-income assistance housing and off government assistance programs.</p> <p>“But then the school loans hit,” said Wilson. “I couldn’t afford the payments on top of rent and all of the other things, there was no way that I could make those payments.”</p> <p>She is not alone, as student debt in America has become a crisis for millions of citizens that often feels like it will last for people’s whole lives, or at least blight them for many years to come after graduation. Around <a href="#">44.7 million Americans</a> have outstanding student loan debt totaling <a href="#">over \$1.86tn</a>, with 42.3 million Americans holding federal student loan debt.</p> <p>The US Department of Education <a href="#">paused</a> repayment, collections and interest on federal student loans in response to the Covid-19 pandemic under Trump, with <a href="#">the final extension</a> on the pause set to expire on 31 January 2022.</p> <p>But now millions of Americans are bracing for resuming payments on federal student loans after nearly two years of relief – and the crisis is set to roll on again.</p> <p>Between rent, bills and daycare costs, Wilson went into default after not being able to keep up with student loan payments. Then her paychecks started being garnished in 2010 to pay off the student loans of around \$1,000 per month, which was just paying off the interest on her principal.</p> <p>The pause on student loan repayments during the pandemic allowed Wilson to catch up on other bills and purchase a home, but she worries about the payments restarting.</p> <p>“It kind of concerns me a little bit with it coming back with what they’re going to be able to offer us in terms of payment plans,” added Wilson. “I’ve been making payments for 20 years and my balance has only gone up. That doesn’t make any sense. If I made a \$1,000 per month payment on my car, or on my house, I would be paid off and I would not have a home loan or would not have a car loan. But with this, it doesn’t seem to make a difference.”</p>

A recent [survey](#) of more than 33,000 student loan borrowers conducted by the Student Debt Crisis Center found 89% of borrowers are not financially secure enough to resume payments on 1 February. Prior to the pandemic, [over half of all student loan borrowers](#) were either in default, forbearance, deferment, or otherwise not currently making payments on their student debt.

PJ Rivera of Texas is one of the borrowers not prepared to resume student loan payments. His initial student debt was around \$80,000, but has increased with interest to \$110,000, despite making payments of \$1,000 a month.

“Student loans have crippled my ability to have personal savings but the inability to help my family who are struggling with hospital bills and other medical bills,” said Rivera. “The system doesn’t work. It’s not the students’ fault because you need money to pay for your career. Maybe tuition shouldn’t be so high to start with. Everyone should be able to study and learn about whatever they are passionate about without going broke or living to pay and nothing else.”

The average student loan debt for new college graduates is [around \\$30,000](#). Joe Biden [campaigned](#) on cancelling \$10,000 in student loan debt per person and cancelling student debt for Americans who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities and public colleges, but the Biden Administration has yet to cancel debt for these Americans

Beverly Dunker Brown of New York City completed her undergraduate and graduate degrees in the 1980s and 90’s, but with high interest rates and taking on parent plus loans for her son, her student loan debt has increased from around \$43,000 in loans to over \$150,000.

“I will be in my late 80s paying student loans off of social security income,” said Dunker Brown. “I have Federal Family Education Loan Program loans which were not paused. I can’t afford to pay them and continue to request forbearances on them.”

Despite making a six-figure salary in business administration, she is unable to properly save for retirement, save for home, and cares for her disabled husband who is a cancer survivor and regularly requires dialysis. Her own student loans are \$862 monthly and the parent plus loans for her son will add another \$362 a month when the federal student loan pause ends.

“The interest and penalties are just crazy. My student loan balance increases each month. Black and Brown people can’t get ahead,” added Dunker Brown. “I have no generational wealth, retirement savings or savings for an emergency, yet I have an MBA that I earned in 1996. Having a fancy degree wasn’t the answer it was supposed to be.”

Black college graduates owe an [average of \\$7,400](#) more in student loans than white college graduates, and that gap more than triples to nearly \$25,000 after four years from graduation.

Sabrina Elliott of Charlotte, North Carolina, couldn’t afford to make payments toward her student loans for the first eight years after graduating law school. By the time she could afford to start making payments, with the debt ballooned from over \$72,000 to more than \$166,000.

For the past seven years, Elliott has made monthly minimum payments of nearly \$1,400 a month, but still owes more than the original loans despite paying over \$90,000 toward the debt in that time.

“Student loans should not impair a person from being a homeowner, starting a family or a badge of shame,” said Elliott. “I have made payment for over seven years and the balance is the same. As you can see, I have repaid the original loan. The minimum payment is a mortgage payment but not high enough to reduce the debt.”

Kaida Flowers, a family and child therapist in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has struggled to try to pay her student loans from her undergraduate and master’s degree, and only makes around \$50,000 a year working

	<p>a job she pursued to try to help people and emphasized student debt is causing her and others who pursued similar career paths to struggle to get by.</p> <p>She has struggled to try to pay her student loans from her undergraduate and master's degree, and only makes around \$50,000 a year working a job she pursued to try to help people and emphasized student debt is causing her and others who pursued similar career paths to struggle to get by.</p> <p>When the payments resume, she will be forced to pay \$300 a month again toward her student debt, most of which goes toward interest.</p> <p>"They're killing the middle class," added Flowers. "Part of the American dream is you go to school, you try to do something to have a better life, but it's just not what it is."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 South Africa Covid cases surge 255%</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/09/south-african-covid-cases-up-255-in-a-week-as-omicron-spreads">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/09/south-african-covid-cases-up-255-in-a-week-as-omicron-spreads</a>
GIST	<p>Covid cases in South Africa have surged by 255% in the past seven days but there is mounting anecdotal evidence that infections with the Omicron variant are provoking only mild symptoms.</p> <p>According to a South African healthcare provider, the recent rise in infections – which includes the Omicron and Delta variants – has been accompanied by a much smaller increase in admissions to intensive care beds, echoing an earlier report from the country's National Institute for Communicable Disease (NICD).</p> <p>On Thursday Marco Cavaleri, the head of biological threats to health and vaccines strategy at the European Medicines Agency, said the situation in Europe remained "extremely worrying", primarily due to the spread of the Delta variant, while preliminary data on Omicron suggested it may be more transmissible than Delta but cases appeared to be mostly mild.</p> <p>"However we need to gather more evidence to determine whether the spectrum of disease severity caused by Omicron is different to that of all the variants that have been circulating so far," Cavaleri said. "Only time will tell."</p> <p>He said it appeared that the currently approved Covid vaccines were considerably less effective in neutralising Omicron, but "we need to gather a more precise picture around the level of immunity that can be retained".</p> <p>The World Health Organization said Africa currently accounts for 46% of reported Omicron cases globally.</p> <p>South Africa's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, has said that despite the global concern over Omicron, it was still unclear whether it was more transmissible or caused more severe disease, and he criticised western countries for imposing a travel ban on the country.</p> <p>South Africa's biggest private healthcare provider, Netcare, said data from its facilities indicated less severe Covid symptoms in the current fourth wave than in previous waves.</p> <p>"Having personally seen many of our patients across our Gauteng hospitals, their symptoms are far milder than anything we experienced during the first three waves," Netcare's Richard Friedland told the Daily Maverick on Wednesday.</p> <p>"Approximately 90% of Covid-19 patients currently in our hospitals require no form of oxygen therapy and are considered incidental cases. If this trend continues, it would appear that, with a few exceptions of those requiring tertiary care, the fourth wave can be adequately treated at a primary care level."</p>

	<p>Friedland said that in previous waves 26% of Netcare’s Covid patients were treated in high care and intensive care units.</p> <p>Friedland’s comments echo earlier analysis from Dr Fareed Abdullah, of the South African Medical Research Council, who said many of the patients diagnosed with Covid in hospitals in badly hit Gauteng province and elsewhere were often “incidental” identifications in patients presenting with other conditions.</p> <p>“The main observation that we have made over the last two weeks is that the majority of patients in the Covid wards have not been oxygen dependent. Sars-CoV-2 has been an incidental finding in patients that were admitted to the hospital for another medical, surgical or obstetric reason,” Abdullah said.</p> <p>“A snapshot of 42 patients in the ward on 2 December reveals that 29 (70%) are not oxygen dependent. These patients are saturating well on room air and do not present with any respiratory symptoms. A significant early finding in this analysis is the much shorter average length of stay of 2.8 days for patients admitted to the Covid wards over the last two weeks, compared to an average length of stay of 8.5 days for the past 18 months.”</p> <p>South African and other experts have said it is still too early in the Omicron outbreak to determine the longer-term course of the illness, and the younger population profile of South Africa means other countries may not necessarily see the same public health outcomes.</p> <p>South Africa has struggled at times with initially distinguishing between Covid variants, with some testing equipment unable to quickly spot Omicron without sequencing.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Schools confront wave student misbehavior</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-student-misbehavior-remote-learning-covid-11639061247?mod=hp_lead_pos5">https://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-student-misbehavior-remote-learning-covid-11639061247?mod=hp_lead_pos5</a>
GIST	<p>School districts across the U.S. say they are seeing a surge of student misbehavior in the <a href="#">return to in-person learning</a>, after months of closures and disruptions due to the pandemic.</p> <p>In the hallway between classes one afternoon this fall at Southwood High School in Shreveport, La., two boys exchanged words. All at once, they jumped at each other, witnesses said. Dozens of other students joined and they all fell into a heap, kicking and punching, until teachers pulled them apart.</p> <p>The fight was one in a series of brawls in Southwood’s courtyards and hallways on three subsequent days that led to 23 students being arrested and expelled.</p> <p>School officials say they had never seen anything like it before at Southwood, known for its Cowboys football team, its biotechnology program and its scenic location on a former cattle ranch. The academically strong school has a 99% graduation rate for its student body of more than 1,600.</p> <p>“We knew it was going to be a problem with kids transitioning back from virtual, because they haven’t been in school for a couple of years,” said Southwood’s principal, Kim Pendleton. “You have eighth-graders that are now 10th-graders or seventh-graders that are now ninth-graders, and no time to really acclimate.”</p> <p>Schools have seen an increase in both minor incidents, like students talking in class, and more serious issues, such as fights and gun possession. In Dallas, disruptive classroom incidents have tripled this year compared with pre-pandemic levels, school officials said. The Albuquerque, N.M., superintendent sent a letter to parents warning of a “rise in violence and unacceptable behaviors posted to social media” that have disrupted classes. The National Association of School Resource Officers said it has seen a rise in gun-related incidents in schools.</p>



Some schools are responding to the disciplinary problems by dispatching more staffers to patrol school grounds or by hiring more counselors. Others are reducing student suspensions, or in Dallas, eliminating them altogether in favor of counseling. Some districts have enacted what they call mental-health days, closing schools around holidays to give students and administrators a break. Peoria, Ill., is planning a special school that would be dedicated to students with issues caused by the pandemic.

Educators at disadvantaged schools, often in low-income neighborhoods, said they had anticipated students would return to in-person learning with mental-health scars from Covid-19. The issues are also coming up at schools that previously had few serious incidents, such as Southwood.

Parents in the relatively affluent suburb of Cherry Creek, Colo., outside Denver, said they were surprised to receive a letter from their school district in November that expressed concern over recent increases in the number of behavioral incidents involving high-school students.

“On-campus behavior issues include students treating each other and adults disrespectfully in and out of class in addition to leaving trash in halls, cafeterias, and outdoor spaces,” according to the letter sent to families from Cherry Creek High School. The letter asked parents to speak to their children about appropriate behavior and noted that incidents of misbehavior were occurring off-campus as well.

The last school year that wasn’t affected by Covid-19 was 2018-19—three years ago—which has in part hurt routines, discipline and social skills, officials said.

“For some of our students, they really have never experienced a ‘normal’ year of high school,” said Cherry Creek district spokeswoman Abbe Smith.

Peter Faustino, a school psychologist in New York who serves on the board of directors for the National Association of School Psychologists, said school psychologists across the country have seen roughly the same volume of mental-health complaints and behavioral issues in the first three months of the school year that used to occur in an entire academic year.

“I think the pandemic was like an earthquake and I think we are seeing that tidal wave hit shore,” he said.

L.V. Stockard Middle School, in the Dallas neighborhood of Oak Cliff, used to suspend students who misbehave. It now sends them to what the district calls a reset center, typically in unused classrooms and sometimes in outdoor sessions, where they get counseling for between one to three days.

One day in October, three students who had gotten into trouble sat on beanbags arranged in a circle outdoors near the school’s entrance. Pierre Fleurinor, the school’s reset center coordinator, pulled up a bean bag and sat down with them.

He began with some chatty questions: Which superhero is their favorite and why? What is their favorite cereal? The three students passed a ball among them to indicate who was speaking.

Then Mr. Fleurinor turned serious, asking what they were doing to avoid the misbehavior that had led to their disciplinary problems.

“Talking about it like this helps,” said Masiah Jones, 12 years old. The seventh-grader had landed in Mr. Fleurinor’s reset center for repeatedly talking with another girl while her teacher was giving lessons. She had never been in trouble before, she said, and had wanted to catch up with her friend, whom she hadn’t seen since the pandemic began.

Masiah’s mother, Anissa Freeney, said her daughter had sometimes felt isolated and disconnected from friends during school closures.

“She definitely didn’t get to see them, and they really don’t communicate on the phone,” Ms. Freeney said. “It was like a void was there.” Masiah hasn’t been in trouble in class since attending the reset center.

Time away from school during the pandemic has set back many students, Mr. Fleurinor said. “In that year off, we lost a lot of social maturity. So, they don’t know how to express their emotions,” he said.

In Dallas, elementary-school students now start the day with a 45-minute social-emotional learning session. One recent morning, third-graders at H.I. Holland Elementary School talked about their favorite weekend activities, followed by hand-clapping games in which they had to feign touching each other’s hands due to social-distancing rules. The session ended with breathing exercises.

Such social-emotional lessons remind children how to communicate, said teacher Josefina Berry. “They were isolated for so long that they kind of lost that tune,” she said.

Frank Zenere, a Miami school psychologist and crisis management specialist at the district’s division of student services, said the pandemic has had a greater impact on student behavior than other traumatic events, such as Sept. 11 or hurricanes.

“An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior,” Mr. Zenere said. “And in that context, I think we’re seeing a lot of normal reactions for what they’ve been through.”

At Southwood High School, senior Jordan Nash witnessed the big fight among students in the hallway. “It seemed like they were just swinging at people left and right,” said the 17-year-old, who has an interest in studying neuroscience. “Then you have the police siren going off, trying to break up the fight. It was a mess.”

Jordan wasn’t hit, but watching the fight, and then the adults pulling everyone apart, was draining, he said. “Ever since we got back to school, we have to deal with Covid, and, also here, we have to deal with the fighting and violence,” he said. “It’s a lot.”

Most of the students involved in the fights were underclassmen, said Dr. Pendleton, Southwood’s principal, and were simply unprepared for a new school after nearly two years of virtual learning. Many carried emotional baggage from the pandemic, including sick or dead family members, lost jobs and homelessness, she said.

In the wake of the fighting, police established patrols at Southwood. Dr. Pendleton expanded a student mentoring program and added counselors and security officers. A group of fathers of students formed a daily patrol, called Dads on Duty, to walk the school hallways and courtyards.

One of the group’s founders, Michael La’Fitte, a local entrepreneur, said the Southwood fathers act as hall monitors and play the role of “cool uncle” with students. He said they seek to be a calming influence on kids who are anxious about Covid-19 stresses as well as a crime wave in the city that has prompted police to enforce a nighttime curfew.

“This is different for all of us,” Mr. La’Fitte said of life coming out of the pandemic. “We’re all trying to adjust to this, even at this moment.”

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HEADLINE	12/09 Jobless claims fall to 52yr-low
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/weekly-jobless-claims-12-09-2021-11638997824?mod=hp_lead_pos3">https://www.wsj.com/articles/weekly-jobless-claims-12-09-2021-11638997824?mod=hp_lead_pos3</a>
GIST	<p>Worker filings for unemployment benefits hit the lowest level in more than half a century last week as a tight labor market keeps layoffs low.</p> <p>Initial jobless claims, a proxy for layoffs, <a href="#">fell to 184,000</a> in the week ended Dec. 4, the lowest level since September 1969, the Labor Department said Thursday. That was close to a recent record total of 194,000 recorded in late November.</p>

The prior week's level was revised up to 227,000. The four-week moving average, which smooths out weekly volatility, fell to 218,750.

Unemployment claims have been steadily falling all year as the labor market has tightened. They have now fallen below where they were before the pandemic caused layoffs to surge in March 2020. Claims averaged 218,000 in 2019, the year before the pandemic hit the U.S.

The decline in new claims is an indication that employers are reluctant to lay off workers at a time when jobs are plentiful, consumer demand is high and the pool of prospective workers remains lower than before the pandemic.

Employers have been offering higher wages and increased benefits to attract workers. Hourly private sector wages [were up 4.8% in November](#) from the previous year, the Labor Department said Friday, the same level as in October and well above where they were before the pandemic.

There were [11 million job openings in October](#), up from 10.6 million in September, according to the Labor Department. By contrast there were 7.4 million unemployed workers that month, a sign of the tight labor market.

Layoffs held steady at 1.4 million in October, the department said.

"The overriding dynamic in the job market of late has been this shortage of workers," said Mark Hamrick, senior economic analyst at Bankrate. "The issue of fresh job loss has not been key for many months now."

The unemployment rate [fell to 4.2% in November](#) from 4.6% in October, the Labor Department reported Friday. The share of people ages 25 to 54 who are either working or looking for work rose to 82.1% from 81.9%, a sign that prime-age Americans are starting to get back into the labor force. But the labor-force participation rate for that age group remains below where it was in February 2020, when it stood at 83.1%.

Despite the recent gains, the labor market still has room to recover. As of November, there were 3.9 million fewer jobs than in February 2020, before the pandemic disrupted the economy. And there were 2.4 million fewer people in the workforce.

"We know that the job market is not going to look like it did exactly before the pandemic," said Mr. Hamrick. "But I think it's important to note that there's been substantial healing."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Italy fines Amazon \$1.3B antitrust case</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-fined-1-3-billion-in-italian-antitrust-case-11639043714?mod=hp_lead_pos2">https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-fined-1-3-billion-in-italian-antitrust-case-11639043714?mod=hp_lead_pos2</a>
GIST	<p>MILAN—Italy's antitrust regulator fined <a href="#">Amazon.com</a> Inc. \$1.3 billion, saying it harmed competitors by favoring third-party sellers that use the company's logistics services, a decision that reflects increased scrutiny of tech giants by antitrust regulators globally.</p> <p>The regulator said Thursday that Amazon favored sellers in Italy that paid it to use its warehouse and delivery services, including by making them more likely to appear as the default option, or "Buy Box," when consumers click to buy a product.</p> <p>The fine of 1.13 billion euros is part of a <a href="#">wave of antitrust enforcement</a> in Europe and elsewhere against Amazon and other big tech companies for allegedly abusing their dominance to squash smaller competitors.</p> <p>Companies including Apple Inc., <a href="#">Alphabet</a> Inc.'s Google and Meta Platforms Inc.'s Facebook have in the past two years faced formal investigations, charges or fines in a variety of cases filed by the European</p>

Union and countries including the U.S., the U.K., France and Germany. The companies have denied wrongdoing.

In addition to the fine, the Italian regulator ordered Amazon to offer “fair and nondiscriminatory standards” for listings from third-party sellers, which it would monitor through an appointed trustee.

In Italy, the antitrust regulator can fine a company up to 10% of its annual revenue, though the final figure depends on where abuses happened and how long they lasted. A spokeswoman said the fine might be the largest ever imposed by the regulator.

Amazon called the fine and remedies outlined by Italian authorities “unjustified and disproportionate” and said it would appeal. In the Italian legal system, if the first court confirms the fine and remedies, the company can appeal again to a higher court. The court can also decide to reduce the fine or adjust the changes Amazon is required to make.

The antitrust regulator’s two-year investigation found that in 2019 Amazon’s market share in online marketplaces was up to five times that of its closest competitor and that the gap has widened considerably in the past four years. In 2019, more than 70% of the total value of third-party sellers’ product sales on online marketplaces in Italy occurred on amazon.it, according to the regulator.

Amazon has used that dominance to favor the adoption of its logistics services, which to consumers appear as “fulfillment by Amazon” when they are choosing which product to buy.

Amazon’s treatment of third-party sellers on its platforms has become a subject of hot debate. A [Wall Street Journal investigation](#) last year found that Amazon employees used data from other sellers to develop competing products. Amazon launched an internal investigation, and said that employees doing so would violate its policies.

Amazon says it relies significantly on third-party sellers for its revenue and is therefore invested in their success. It says the majority of its sellers don’t use its logistics service, and those that do do so because it is efficient and cost effective.

Regulators allege that in practice it can be hard for outside companies to meet Amazon’s criteria to qualify for better placement on its site, saying that it effectively forces some sellers to use the company’s logistics services.

The EU’s top competition enforcer is pursuing a similar investigation to the Italian probe. Last year, the bloc [separately filed antitrust charges](#) against Amazon for allegedly using nonpublic data from third-party sellers to compete against them. The company has denied wrongdoing.

The EU competition enforcer cooperated closely with the Italian competition authority on the case to “ensure consistency with its own investigations,” according to an EU spokeswoman. Both investigations are ongoing.

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HEADLINE	12/09 Covid-19 cause flu strain to go extinct?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/did-covid-19-cause-flu-strain-to-go-extinct-11639054801?mod=hp_lead_pos13">https://www.wsj.com/articles/did-covid-19-cause-flu-strain-to-go-extinct-11639054801?mod=hp_lead_pos13</a>
GIST	<p>SYDNEY—Australian researchers who have spent much of the past two years studying Covid-19 recently turned their attention to another public-health mystery: the possible disappearance of one of the four main strains of flu that infect humans.</p> <p>Around the world, labs that use genetic sequencing to determine which flu strain has sickened a patient upload their findings to an international database known as GISAID. Since early last year, none of those labs have confirmed the presence of the influenza B Yamagata lineage, the technical name for one of the four strains.</p>

Now, researchers want to know if the Yamagata lineage has gone extinct. If it has, that could affect the formulation of [annual flu vaccines](#), which often protect against all four strains. Without Yamagata, vaccine makers could revert to a three-strain vaccine, or they could try to add in protection against another influenza variant, which might offer a better defense against one of the remaining strains.

“If it’s gone, it’s a big deal,” said Marios Koutsakos, a research fellow from the University of Melbourne at the Doherty Institute, and the lead author on a September paper about Yamagata’s possible disappearance. “But the world is a very big place. It could be somewhere where we’re just not seeing it.”

Flu infections globally [have plummeted](#) because lockdowns, social-distancing measures and travel restrictions aimed at suppressing Covid-19 have also succeeded in limiting influenza transmission. That has narrowed the genetic diversity of all flu strains, not just Yamagata, scientists say. Doctors are [bracing for a worse U.S. flu season](#) this year as Covid-19 restrictions have largely been lifted, but predicting the flu cycle’s severity is difficult.

Several factors could explain Yamagata’s disappearance. The lineage more often infects adults than children compared with the other main influenza B strain, and many adults are working from home and fewer are traveling overseas. Scientists have determined that Yamagata evolves more slowly than the other influenza B strain, possibly making it more vulnerable to eradication.

“If there’s a silver lining to a Covid pandemic, this might be one of them,” said Richard Webby, a virologist at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn.

Influenza B viruses account for about 25% of human flu infections on average, and the other influenza B strain—the Victoria lineage—continues to circulate. The two strains were found in the 1980s, and the names refer to the places they were first identified.

Influenza A viruses, of which there are two main subtypes circulating among humans—H1N1 and H3N2, named for the major proteins on the virus surface—account for the remaining human flu cases.

Scientists believe it will take at least another year to verify whether Yamagata is extinct. Many are cautious about jumping to conclusions, as there is so little flu circulating in the aftermath of Covid-19 restrictions. The strain of flu that makes up the bulk of cases can vary from year to year, they say.

Meanwhile, some labs that normally test for flu viruses have focused on Covid-19.

Dr. Koutsakos and his colleagues based their research on the GISAID database. Adding to the mystery is that another database from the World Health Organization used to track flu, called FluNet, has registered 46 Yamagata cases this year, according to figures from the WHO’s website.

FluNet mostly includes data from labs in each country that are based on PCR tests—a molecular test that detects genetic material using polymerase chain reaction technology. PCR tests differ from sequencing and occasionally produce errors, so the FluNet hits could be false positives. Scientists now expect more emphasis on sequencing influenza B samples to determine which lineage is present.

Ian Barr, deputy director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza at the Doherty Institute in Melbourne, Australia, said his facility had received an unusually low number of influenza samples for genetic sequencing this year. The center has obtained about 300 influenza-positive samples from countries in the region this year, compared with about 9,300 in 2019, 4,100 in 2018 and 5,900 in 2017, according to numbers he provided.

“Until we can get back to some normal type of surveillance, I think it would be difficult to be sure that it’s gone,” he said.

The extinction of an influenza virus strain isn't unprecedented, but it is unusual to have one disappear without another emerging, scientists said. Influenza A viruses circulate widely in animals, and new versions can spread to humans, causing a pandemic and outcompeting existing strains—as occurred in 1957, 1968 and 2009. Influenza B viruses, in contrast, are believed to circulate nearly exclusively in humans without a reservoir of animal hosts, so an influenza B strain would be expected to disappear only if a more dominant descendant evolved naturally in humans.

If Yamagata is extinct, scientists will have to decide how that affects flu vaccines. Twice a year, a WHO committee recommends which variant of each of the four main flu strains to include in vaccines for flu seasons in the northern and southern hemispheres. The final decision lies with individual countries, but they generally follow the WHO recommendation.

The WHO said it doesn't consider Yamagata to have disappeared as a few cases have been reported, albeit without genetic sequencing for confirmation. It said there was no discussion about omitting Yamagata from the four-strain flu vaccine at the committee's most recent meeting in September.

"We have seen previously, based on lack of virus detections, apparent loss of particular [groups] only for them to re-emerge at a later time," the WHO said.

If Yamagata is extinct, some scientists suggest dropping it from the vaccine and including two variants of the H3N2 influenza A virus, which in the past has been genetically diverse, making it tricky to pick the right one.

Gregg Sylvester, chief medical officer at Seqirus, a flu-vaccine maker owned by Australia-based CSL Ltd. said it is technically feasible to make a shot with three A viruses and one B virus.

Still, regulators could consider such a formulation to constitute a new vaccine and require it to go through a lengthy approval process. Some scientists say its efficacy would need to be shown in clinical trials as it is unclear if the immune system would focus on each H3N2 variant equally and that one might predominate.

Experts are also uncertain about what effect Yamagata's disappearance would have on flu cases overall. Exposure to Yamagata gives some immunity to the Victoria lineage. Yamagata has been historically detected more in temperate regions, so its disappearance could offer more relief for people there.

For Dr. Koutsakos, the researcher in Melbourne, there is little to do but wait for the latest genetic sequencing.

"Personally, I'm frantically refreshing the database," he said.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Left behind in era of electric cars</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/09/charging-deserts-evs/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/09/charging-deserts-evs/</a>
GIST	<p>CHICAGO — Standing on the rear third-floor deck of the Blacks in Green building on South Cottage Grove Avenue, Naomi Davis and Stacey McIlvaine looked out over the desert that is West Woodlawn.</p> <p>Davis, an environmental activist, and McIlvaine, an electrician, had come together on a gray fall day to discuss how they could correct a complete absence of electric vehicle chargers in one of Chicago's preeminent Black neighborhoods.</p> <p>McIlvaine pointed out possible locations for a charger in the parking lot behind the building. Davis, the founder of the 14-year-old Blacks in Green environmental advocacy organization, considered that if her organization doesn't act, her community might be left behind in the era of electric cars.</p>



“We’re used to elbowing our way to the table,” Davis said. “You have to push and step in and get momentum, because if you don’t, you’ll never catch up.”

Look at any map of charging stations in the United States, and in [most of the big cities](#), what is immediately apparent are big blank spaces coinciding with Black and Latino neighborhoods. Electric vehicle advocates call them charging deserts.

While electric vehicle use is growing rapidly in well-to-do, mostly White communities, minority neighborhoods are being left behind.

In the coming age, the lack of charging stations and electric vehicles that depend on them threatens to worsen an already disproportionate [exposure to air pollution](#) in minority neighborhoods and relegate Black and Latino drivers to gasoline-powered cars, which, though cheaper to buy, are more expensive to fuel and maintain.

“If residents of the city cannot participate equitably in the EV market, that would be a failure,” said Stefan Schaffer, a strategist for the American Cities Climate Challenge at the Natural Resources Defense Council. “You want to make sure all communities can participate in the economy of the future.”

It’s a question, he said, of “mobility justice.”

But without easily accessible charging stations in Black and Latino communities, advocates in Chicago and across the country say, it will be hard to make progress. In urban neighborhoods where residents lack driveways or garages and must rely on street parking, public chargers are a necessity to persuade consumers to buy electric cars. Yet without EVs in place, there is no commercial incentive to install them.

“They have put Black and Brown people, the people who can least afford it, at the mercy of the market,” said Nuri Madina, the managing director of Blacks in Green.

The infrastructure bill just passed by Congress includes \$7.5 billion for the installation of new chargers. The Biden administration wants to see more than 500,000 in place by 2030, a fourfold increase from the current number. The challenge the administration will face is in getting the bill implemented — and in how decisions are made over placement of the chargers.

General Motors, in announcing in October that it will establish up to 40,000 charging stations across the United States and Canada, promised that some will be in underserved urban as well as rural areas.

At the local level, cities from Boston to Orlando to Los Angeles are already moving to try to make a difference.

So far, their efforts are only a start. Here in Chicago, a new ordinance requires new multifamily residences to include charging stations. The state of Illinois has adopted subsidies for EVs that are scaled to income.

An organization called Mobility Development is operating “equity-minded” EV car-sharing programs in Boston; Rochester, N.Y.; and the San Joaquin Valley in California; each with a few chargers open to the public.

St. Paul, Minn., is preparing to launch an EV car-sharing program next year, aimed in part at low-income families who don’t own a car.

Most of these efforts are incremental — a couple of ordinary chargers in Black neighborhoods, a small collection of EVs for car sharing. But some argue that cities need bolder projects to get to equity, or else will always be lagging.

Pittsburgh, where the worst air pollution closely tracks with historic Black neighborhoods, has produced a “Mobility Vision Plan” that seeks to “advance mobility justice to redress the infrastructure racism of the



past.” The plan calls for expanding clean transportation options — including EVs — to reach every resident of the city.

In New York, a company called Revel decided that the way to jump-start EV adoption in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood was to launch a fleet of electric taxis and build an industrial-size charging station that is used for the cabs and also open to the public in that predominantly Black community.

The taxi fleet “gives us a captive, guaranteed source of demand as we build out our infrastructure,” said Paul Suhey, a co-founder of the company, and that makes it possible to offer a charging service in a neighborhood that has until now not been able to embrace EVs. The charging station is equipped with direct-current fast chargers, which are much more expensive to install than slower models and use significantly more electricity. Suhey argued that these are the best solutions for people who have nowhere to charge their cars at home or while on the job.

But that specific plan wouldn’t work in a lot of cities, where taxis are less of a factor.

“Fast chargers right now, the economics aren’t particularly great,” said David Kolata, executive director of the Citizens Utility Board, a consumer advocacy group in Illinois. Without the prospect of a financial return, “no one’s going to come out and build one.”

Advocates say that supply — in the form of chargers — has to come before demand will materialize. Even then, demand doesn’t spring up overnight. A charger installed last May by McIlvaine at a nonprofit called Plant Chicago, in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, had had three customers as of mid-October.

But advocates are optimistic that with enough chargers out there, with enough visibility, Black and Latino people will turn to EVs, especially as used electric cars start to come on the market at more affordable prices.

“You have to have the charger there to encourage people to buy electric cars,” said Heather Hochrein, CEO and founder of EVmatch, a Redwood City, Calif., company that produces software for chargers and is taking part in a grant to introduce chargers to underserved Chicago neighborhoods.

“These are communities that just don’t have a lot of demand, and we’re hoping to spur that demand,” she said.

Some proponents of mass transit have mixed feelings about electric cars, especially in a city like Chicago, where more than a quarter of the households do not own a car of any kind.

“This huge investment in electric vehicles just traps us in a car-dependent, asphalt-heavy future,” said Richard Watts, director of the Center for Research on Vermont at the University of Vermont. “These investments build a constituency for a motorized world.”

“It’s not an either-or,” said Kolata, of the Citizens Utility Board. “We need both. It’s very important to prioritize the electrification of transit.”

As it is, neighborhood leaders say, public transit in some Chicago neighborhoods is so spotty that electric cars — shared, rented or owned — have to be part of the equation. And they “would create a more livable city for all residents,” said Schaffer, “because tailpipe fumes affect everyone.”

Looking to the neighborhood

For years, the environmental movement in the United States had a predominantly White, middle-class identity. Davis founded Blacks in Green out of a recognition that pollution is a concern for Black communities as well. The organization lobbied for an ordinance that would ban water shut-offs when

residents can't pay their bills, and supported a campaign to promote alternatives to natural gas instead of spending billions of dollars in rate payers' money to refurbish the city's aging pipes.

Davis helped lead the effort in support of Illinois' new climate legislation, which in addition to providing subsidies for EV purchases, sets targets for phasing out coal and natural gas with an emphasis on communities hit hardest by air pollution.

With EVs, Davis is determined to make sure that Black Chicagoans play a key role in solving the drought.

"We've worked so hard to bring the clean energy economy to the Black community," she said. "We wanted to make sure that Black contractors for the Black community — that when the clean energy economy comes to Chicago, they'd be a part of it. Give people a chance to see what it's like to grow something from scratch in the 'hood."

Neda Deylami, who lives on the North Side and drives a Tesla, was a founder of Chicago for EVs, an interest group. She was also on the deck that day with Davis and McIlvaine. "Some people say it's a sign of gentrification when you see chargers," she said. "I think it's how you approach it. It's important to have the right people at the table" — people, she said, conscious of "historical injustices that continue to persist today."

Blacks in Green recently purchased the nearby house where Emmett Till lived until, at the age of 14, he made his fateful 1955 trip to visit relatives in Mississippi and was brutally murdered by White racists. His death shocked people across the country, especially after his mother insisted that his casket be open at his funeral rather than hide his mutilated face.

Davis wants to put another charger there.

As she sees it, the Till house exemplifies the Great Migration of Black Americans out of the South, and the barriers and resistance they met in Northern cities that forced them to build their own businesses and create their own institutions. "When you're talking about the Till house, you're talking about enterprise," she said.

A Black-organized project to install chargers there and throughout Chicago's Black neighborhoods, she said, is a natural step to take.

#### On Motor Row

The nearby Bronzeville neighborhood is where Black jazz musicians came to stay when they moved north from New Orleans. Because cabdrivers refused to go there, residents relied for decades on private jitneys to get around — cars that followed set routes through the community.

Today, Billy Davis (no relation to Naomi) is head of JitneyEV, a start-up that plans to re-create that old business, but with electric cars and more flexible routing.

The pandemic has put that project on hold, but for the time being, Davis, a onetime press spokesman for local politicians, is an enthusiastic promoter of EVs.

Showing a visitor around Bronzeville, he stops at an old Ford dealership on Michigan Avenue at 24th Street. It's a grand Roman brick structure from the 1920s, decorated with terra-cotta tiles and Egyptian-themed pilasters. This was on Chicago's original Motor Row, when the auto age was young, and now Davis and his colleagues at the Bronzeville Community Development Partnership, a nonprofit organization, want to refashion the building for the coming century, installing a coffee shop and EV charging station. They'll call it Jolt — get a slug of caffeine while your EV gets an electric charge.

There should be no lack of business, Davis said, because Motor Row is just off the intersection of Interstates 55 and 90. Those are highways that were carved, as in most U.S. cities, through predominantly Black neighborhoods.

“We approach this from a viewpoint of environmental justice,” Davis said. “Interstate construction disrupted the chain of wealth-building, and it has a negative health impact.”

Covid-19, which has stricken polluted Black communities harder than well-to-do White ones, emphasized the disparity, he said.

“Our proximity to the negative effects of fossil fuel production, to the interstate highway, puts us at risk,” he said. “When you have charging deserts, this is where the investment has to occur, because this is where the problem is most egregious — lung disease and asthma and so forth. There is such a thing as environmental racism, so there has to be a reckoning.”

On average, non-Hispanic White people enjoy a “pollution advantage,” according to a 2019 study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. “They experience [about] 17% less air pollution exposure than is caused by their consumption. Blacks and Hispanics on average bear a ‘pollution burden’ of 56% and 63% excess exposure, respectively, relative to the exposure caused by their consumption.”

“Who suffers most from air pollution? It tends to be lower-income folks who live in transit deserts,” Kolata said.

Paula Robinson, who founded the Bronzeville Community Development Partnership, also believes that the Black community has to take the initiative in the installation of EV infrastructure and the creation of a local EV culture. Another Jolt is planned for an old Streets and Sanitation Department building on Wabash Avenue.

“We’re not here to be lab rats,” she said. For too long, she argued, nearby universities and city agencies have pointed to the problems of Bronzeville to justify the funding of various pilot projects.

“Keep your blight close” is the attitude, she said. “It’s not always vicious, but we’ve been falling for the okey-dokey too long. We see ourselves as co-producers, co-innovators. We have to assert ourselves in terms of that equity.”

Vanessa Perkins, who leads an organization called the Community Charging Initiative, has used a \$25,000 grant from the Global Warming Mitigation Project to arrange for the installation of five chargers around the city. Her task was to find willing hosts — generally a nonprofit organization or a church — that were able to make a parking space available.

“The Episcopalians have been awesome,” she said, motivated by their commitment to “creation care” and stewardship of the Earth.

One charger was installed in October at St. Paul & the Redeemer Episcopal Church, on a quiet backstreet in Hyde Park, a neighborhood that has other chargers but only in the expensive parking garages patronized by doctors and professors. Perkins has applied for another \$5,000 grant to pay for the charger that Naomi Davis wants to install at the Emmett Till house.

Perkins’s project shows one advantage of electric cars, said Kelly Shultz of Bloomberg Philanthropies: There are no zoning restrictions on chargers. “You can put an EV station into so many places you can’t put a gas station,” she said.

The grant was arranged through EVmatch, the California tech firm, which supplied the software for the chargers to handle reservations and billing. “We were interested in bringing EV technology to communities that have had historic underinvestment,” said Hochrein, the CEO.

	<p>Like millions of other city residents across the country, Perkins relies on street parking. She doesn't have the option of charging at home, in a garage or driveway. She has to know where she can find an available charger — there are apps for that — and figure out how to spend the time while her car is hooked up.</p> <p>It's not ideal, but it's a start. Naomi Davis believes there's no time to waste, and any step forward, even a small one, is worth it.</p> <p>"We're not waiting for Jupiter to align with Mars," she said. "There is no choice but to accelerate. We can't continue with combustion engines."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Kentucky emergency: nursing shortage</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/pandemic-nurse-shortage-kentucky-gov-declares-emergency-81660311">https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/pandemic-nurse-shortage-kentucky-gov-declares-emergency-81660311</a>
GIST	<p>FRANKFORT, Ky. -- Kentucky's governor declared the state's chronic nursing shortage to be an emergency Thursday, taking executive actions amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic to boost enrollment in nurse-training programs.</p> <p>Kentucky is projected to need more than 16,000 additional nurses by 2024, to help fill gaps caused by retirements and people leaving the profession, Gov. Andy Beshear said. His new executive order includes "immediate actions that we believe will provide some relief," the Democratic governor said. "Obviously long term there is a lot to do."</p> <p>The nurse staffing emergency in Kentucky reflects a national epidemic created by the pandemic. Health leaders say the problem is twofold: Nurses are quitting or retiring, exhausted or demoralized by the crisis. And many are leaving for lucrative temporary jobs with traveling-nurse agencies.</p> <p>Such severe shortages threaten "not only the health of patients but the entire health care delivery system," Beshear said at a news conference.</p> <p>He added that Kentucky is operating 12% to 20% short of "needed nursing volume."</p> <p>"In the midst of a pandemic, and in the midst of a shortage this dire, we've got to do things a little bit differently, to make sure that we get the results we need at the time that we need them the most," the governor said.</p> <p>His executive order aims to get more students into Kentucky nursing programs.</p> <p>It requires the state Board of Nursing to approve requests for enrollment increases from schools that show sufficient resources to accommodate more students, he said.</p> <p>Nursing schools will be expected to report the number of vacant student slots to the state nursing board each month, the governor said. Those vacancies will be posted on the board's website to let prospective students know where spots are available.</p> <p>The order aims to allow nursing schools to open new campuses more quickly, provided they have sufficient resources, he said. Nursing schools at full capacity will be required to refer qualified student applicants to other schools with vacancies, he said.</p> <p>And schools unable to accommodate their full student capacity due to staffing shortages will be expected to notify state officials, with the goal of helping them hire more faculty, he said. Also, an advisory committee will be formed to offer additional proposals to overcome nursing shortages.</p>

The governor also signaled that his upcoming state budget package will include proposals to attract and retain nurses. His plan will include some form of loan forgiveness or scholarship program for nurses who agree to remain in Kentucky for a designated amount of time, Beshear said. The governor will present his budget plan to the Republican-dominated legislature in early 2022.

Also, nurses who worked throughout the pandemic will be included in his proposal to award essential-worker bonuses. Beshear said he wants to use \$400 million in federal pandemic aid to award the extra pay to a range of frontline workers employed throughout the pandemic.

Beshear made another pitch for the bonuses in hopes of winning support from GOP lawmakers.

"This isn't about process, this isn't about party," he said. "This is about the people that have kept us alive, kept us safe, kept us healthy, kept us fed, kept us safely in our home with our lights and our heat on during this pandemic. Saying no to this program is saying no to them."

It's the second straight day the governor took executive action to confront a nagging state problem.

On Wednesday, Beshear awarded a 10% pay raise to Kentucky's social service workers. The pay boost is aimed at halting the widespread loss of frontline employees demoralized by low salaries and bulging workloads who are serving vulnerable children and adults.

The pay increase takes effect Dec. 16 for social workers and family support services staff, the governor said. It's the result of his action to reclassify their jobs to a higher grade.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 SKorea record-breaking virus surge</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/south-koreas-virus-surge-exceeds-7000-3rd-straight-81668624">https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/south-koreas-virus-surge-exceeds-7000-3rd-straight-81668624</a>
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea -- New coronavirus infections in South Korea exceeded 7,000 for the third consecutive day on Friday in a record-breaking surge that has crushed hospitals and threatens the country's goals to weather the pandemic without lockdowns.</p> <p>Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum said during a virus meeting that the country could be forced to take "extraordinary" measures if the virus doesn't slow soon. Officials issued administrative orders requiring hospitals around the country to designate 2,000 more beds combined for COVID-19 treatment.</p> <p>Kim said the government will also speed up the administration of booster shots by shortening the interval between the second and third vaccine injections from the current four or five months to three months starting next week.</p> <p>Around 41.5 million people, or 81% of the population of over 51 million, have been fully vaccinated, but only 10% have received booster shots.</p> <p>The delta-driven spread in recent weeks has been accompanied by a spike in hospitalizations and deaths, many among people in their 60s or older whose immunities have waned after being inoculated early in the vaccine rollout that began in February.</p> <p>Officials tightened restrictions starting Monday, banning private social gatherings of seven or more people in the greater capital area and requiring adults to verify their vaccination status at restaurants and other indoor venues. But Kim said such measures haven't yet showed an effect in slowing transmissions.</p> <p>"If it becomes clear that we aren't succeeding in reversing this crisis situation within the next few days, the government will have no other choice but to employ extraordinary anti-virus measures, including strong social distancing," said Kim, South Korea's No. 2 behind President Moon Jae-in.</p>

	<p>Deputy Health Minister Lee Ki-il said officials may further reduce the limit on social gatherings and restore business-hour restrictions at restaurants and bars that were lifted in November if things continue to look bad next week.</p> <p>“We will try our best to avoid a lockdown,” Lee said during a briefing.</p> <p>The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said around 5,300 of the 7,022 new cases reported Friday were from capital Seoul and the nearby metropolitan area, where the virus has hit hardest. The country’s death toll is now at 4,130 after 53 virus patients died in the past 24 hours, while 852 others were in serious or critical conditions.</p> <p>South Korea has also tightened its borders to fend off the new omicron variant since identifying its first cases last week that were linked to arrivals from Nigeria. The KDCA said health workers confirmed three more omicron infections on Friday, bringing the tally to 63.</p> <p>Scientists say it's not yet clear whether omicron is more contagious or dangerous than previous strains of the virus.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/09 Scientists focus Covid's animal-origins</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/pandemic-mystery-scientists-focus-covids-animal-origins-81668726">https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/pandemic-mystery-scientists-focus-covids-animal-origins-81668726</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>Nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the origin of the virus tormenting the world remains shrouded in mystery.</p> <p>Most scientists believe it emerged in the wild and jumped from bats to humans, either directly or through another animal. Others theorize it escaped from a Chinese lab.</p> <p>Now, with the global COVID-19 death toll surpassing 5.2 million on the second anniversary of the earliest human cases, a growing chorus of scientists is trying to keep the focus on what they regard as the more plausible “zoonotic,” or animal-to-human, theory, in the hope that what's learned will help humankind fend off new viruses and variants.</p> <p>“The lab-leak scenario gets a lot of attention, you know, on places like Twitter,” but “there’s no evidence that this virus was in a lab,” said University of Utah scientist Stephen Goldstein, who with 20 others wrote an article in the journal Cell in August laying out evidence for animal origin.</p> <p>Michael Worobey, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Arizona who contributed to the article, had signed a letter with other scientists last spring saying both theories were viable. Since then, he said, his own and others’ research has made him even more confident than he had been about the animal hypothesis, which is “just way more supported by the data.”</p> <p>Last month, Worobey published a COVID-19 timeline linking the first known human case to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China, where live animals were sold.</p> <p>“The lab leak idea is almost certainly a huge distraction that’s taking focus away from what actually happened,” he said.</p> <p>Others aren’t so sure. Over the summer, a review ordered by President Joe Biden showed that four U.S. intelligence agencies believed with low confidence that the virus was initially transmitted from an animal to a human, and one agency believed with moderate confidence that the first infection was linked to a lab.</p> <p>Some supporters of the lab-leak hypothesis have theorized that researchers were accidentally exposed because of inadequate safety practices while working with samples from the wild, or perhaps after creating</p>

the virus in the laboratory. U.S. intelligence officials have rejected suspicions China developed the virus as a bioweapon.

The continuing search for answers has inflamed tensions between the U.S. and China, which has accused the U.S. of making it the scapegoat for the disaster. Some experts fear the pandemic's origins may never be known.

#### FROM BATS TO PEOPLE

Scientists said in the Cell paper that SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, is the ninth documented coronavirus to infect humans. All previous ones originated in animals.

That includes the virus that caused the 2003 SARS epidemic, which also has been associated with markets selling live animals in China.

Many researchers believe wild animals were intermediate hosts for SARS-CoV-2, meaning they were infected with a bat coronavirus that then evolved. Scientists have been looking for the exact bat coronavirus involved, and in September identified three viruses in bats in Laos more similar to SARS-CoV-2 than any known viruses.

Worobey suspects raccoon dogs were the intermediate host. The fox-like mammals are susceptible to coronaviruses and were being sold live at the Huanan market, he said.

"The gold-standard piece of evidence for an animal origin" would be an infected animal from there, Goldstein said. "But as far as we know, the market was cleared out."

Earlier this year, a joint report by the World Health Organization and China called the transmission of the virus from bats to humans through another animal the most likely scenario and a lab leak "extremely unlikely."

But that report also sowed doubt by pegging the first known COVID-19 case as an accountant who had no connection to the Huanan market and first showed symptoms on Dec. 8, 2019. Worobey said proponents of the lab-leak theory point to that case in claiming the virus escaped from a Wuhan Institute of Virology facility near where the man lived.

According to Worobey's research, however, the man said in an interview that his Dec. 8 illness was actually a dental problem, and his COVID-19 symptoms began on Dec. 16, a date confirmed in hospital records.

Worobey's analysis identifies an earlier case: a vendor in the Huanan market who came down with COVID-19 on Dec. 11.

#### ANIMAL THREATS

Experts worry the same sort of animal-to-human transmission of viruses could spark new pandemics — and worsen this one.

Since COVID-19 emerged, many types of animals have gotten infected, including pet cats, dogs and ferrets; zoo animals such as big cats, otters and non-human primates; farm-raised mink; and white-tailed deer.

Most got the virus from people, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which says that humans can spread it to animals during close contact but that the risk of animals transmitting it to people is low.



Another fear, however, is that animals could unleash new viral variants. Some wonder if the omicron variant began this way.

“Around the world, we might have animals potentially incubating these variants even if we get (COVID-19) under control in humans,” said David O’Connor, a virology expert at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “We’re probably not going to do a big giraffe immunization program any time soon.”

Worobey said he has been looking for genetic fingerprints that might indicate whether omicron was created when the virus jumped from humans to an animal, mutated, and then leaped back to people.

Experts say preventing zoonotic disease will require not only cracking down on illegal wildlife sales but making progress on big global problems that increase risky human-animal contact, such as habitat destruction and climate change.

Failing to fully investigate the animal origin of the virus, scientists said in the Cell paper, “would leave the world vulnerable to future pandemics arising from the same human activities that have repeatedly put us on a collision course with novel viruses.”

#### ‘TOXIC’ POLITICS

But further investigation is stymied by superpower politics. Lawrence Gostin of Georgetown University said there has been a “bare-knuckles fight” between China and the United States.

“The politics around the origins investigation has literally poisoned the well of global cooperation,” said Gostin, director of the WHO Collaborating Center on National and Global Health Law. “The politics have literally been toxic.”

An AP investigation last year found that the Chinese government was strictly controlling all research into COVID-19’s origins and promoting fringe theories that the virus could have come from outside the country.

“This is a country that’s by instinct very closed, and it was never going to allow unfettered access by foreigners into its territory,” Gostin said.

Still, Gostin said there’s one positive development that has come out of the investigation.

WHO has formed an advisory group to look into the pandemic’s origins. And Gostin said that while he doubts the panel will solve the mystery, “they will have a group of highly qualified scientists ready to be deployed in an instant in the next pandemic.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Australia military switches to US helicopters</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/australian-military-switches-european-us-helicopters-81667392">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/australian-military-switches-european-us-helicopters-81667392</a>
GIST	<p>CANBERRA, Australia -- Australia's military said Friday it plans to ditch its fleet of European-designed Taipan helicopters and instead buy U.S. Black Hawks and Seahawks because the American machines are more reliable.</p> <p>The move comes less than three months after Australia canceled a deal to buy French submarines in favor of building nuclear-powered submarines that use U.S. and British technology in a switch that deeply angered France.</p> <p>Australia has 47 Taipan helicopters that were designed by Airbus and were supposed to last until 2037 but have been plagued with groundings. Australia will stop using them and buy 40 Lockheed Martin-designed helicopters in a switch that will cost 7 billion Australian dollars (\$4.8 billion).</p>

	<p>Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Australia was improving its defense capabilities and had built good partnerships, particularly with the U.S.</p> <p>“The Taipans weren’t meeting their marks. Simple as that,” Morrison said. “And we want to make sure that our defense forces have the best possible equipment to defend this country, and the Black Hawks will provide that.”</p> <p>Defense Minister Peter Dutton said the Black Hawks are much cheaper to fly and that officials have had concerns about the Taipan program for the past decade.</p> <p>“It’s had nine instances where it’s been unsuitable to fly, and I’m just not going to put our people in that position,” Dutton said.</p> <p>He said the new helicopters would bring Australia’s fleet more in line with that of the U.S., an important consideration given the instability in the region.</p> <p>China has previously expressed anger over Australia's submarine switch and said it was irresponsible of the U.S. and Britain to export their nuclear technology.</p> <p>Opposition politicians said the Australian government had wasted billions of dollars on poor decisions around many of its defense contracts.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/09 Nicaragua severs diplomatic ties Taiwan</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/explainer-china-woo-nicaragua-taiwan-81669763">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/explainer-china-woo-nicaragua-taiwan-81669763</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>BEIJING -- Nicaragua’s decision to sever diplomatic links with Taiwan and recognize China leaves the self-governing island democracy with just 14 diplomatic allies.</p> <p>Most are small, largely poor nations in the Western Pacific, the Caribbean and Latin America, the one exception being the Vatican. At the same time, Taiwan enjoys robust unofficial ties with the United States and dozens of other countries.</p> <p>Yet, the loss of formal allies further constrains the Taiwanese leadership’s ability to make state visits abroad and feeds into Beijing’s narrative that Taiwan is losing the diplomatic battle and will eventually be forced to accept the inevitable outcome of political union with the People’s Republic.</p> <p><b>WHAT'S BEHIND NICARAGUA'S DECISION TO SWITCH TIES?</b></p> <p>Nicaragua's authoritarian President Daniel Ortega has increasingly found himself an international pariah, with the United States denouncing last month's presidential polls as a “pantomime election.” That may have prompted Ortega to take up an offer from China, which has been steadily luring away Taiwan's remaining allies by promising trade and development assistance while ignoring political controversies.</p> <p>The fact that Nicaragua maintained ties with Taiwan at all after Ortega's return to power following the 2006 election was a surprise to many. After taking office for the first time in 1979, the Marxist-Leninist Ortega switched ties to Beijing, only for relations with Taipei to be restored after Violeta Chamorro defeated him in 1990's presidential election.</p> <p><b>WHAT INCENTIVES DID CHINA PROVIDE?</b></p> <p>In its announcement, Nicaragua gave no reason for the latest change, but it follows a trend among its Central American neighbors such as Panama and Costa Rica which have switched to Beijing in recent years, prompting concerns in Taipei and Washington of a potential domino effect. Along with</p>

development aid, loans and other incentives, critics allege Beijing uses more underhanded methods such as threats and bribes to win away Taiwan's allies, although no evidence of that has emerged.

The biggest incentive may simply be China's massive and growing international economic and political clout. While Taiwan punches above its weight in trade, particularly in key high-tech industries, it is increasingly isolated diplomatically and has no voice in most international forums. Its upholding of democratic values may only have limited appeal among fragile democracies with struggling economies. China, meanwhile, is increasingly influential, making it well-placed to do favors on behalf of its friends.

#### WHAT IS THE HISTORY BEHIND THE DIPLOMATIC RIVALRY?

The competition for allies dates from the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. That same year, Chiang Kai-shek, defeated in the Chinese civil war, moved his Nationalist regime, known as the Republic of China, to Taiwan. North Korea, the Soviet Union and countries within its sphere swiftly moved to recognize Beijing, while the U.S. and its allies backed Taipei. But as support for China held steady, Taiwan gradually lost the backing of major states such as France and the United Kingdom. The biggest blow came in 1979, when the U.S. moved its Embassy to Beijing and ended a defense treaty with Taiwan.

Over the course of the rivalry, some countries have changed sides multiple times, depending on which made the best offer. But as China grew in influence, and Taiwan became a democracy answerable to parliament and the public, Beijing got the upper hand. Taiwan's election of the China-friendly Ma Ying-jeou as president in 2008 brought about a "diplomatic truce," during which China held off on poaching Taiwan's allies in exchange for Ma's recognition of the "one-China principle" stating the island and mainland China were part of a single Chinese nation. That came to a crashing end with the election of the popular independence-leaning Tsai Ing-wen in 2016. Tsai refused to endorse the principle and the game was back on.

#### CAN TAIWAN PARTICIPATE IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS?

China has also worked to shut Taiwan out of most international bodies. That began with Taiwan's expulsion from the United Nations in 1971 and has intensified in recent years as Beijing seeks to undermine Tsai's government. Amid the pandemic, Taiwan has been deprived of its observer status at the World Health Assembly and Beijing has used its influence and veiled threats to shut the island out of even obscure groupings such as Birdlife International, a British-based non-governmental ornithological society.

China demands Taiwan recognize the one-China principle before it can participate. Despite that, Taiwan has maintained membership in economic bodies that don't require statehood, including the World Trade Organization and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. Taiwan has also applied to join the Tokyo-led Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. China, which filed its own application a week before Taipei, says it will have to join first. Taiwan has also sought to upgrade its unofficial diplomatic ties, most recently with Lithuania. Beijing responded by slapping a trade embargo on the Baltic state and threatening multi-nationals that do business with it.

#### WHAT ROLE DOES THE US PLAY?

Despite the lack of formal ties, Washington remains Taiwan's most important ally and recently opened a new representative office in Taipei that has all the trappings of an embassy. It has continued to sell Taiwan weapons and provide training under the provisions of the Taiwan Relations Act that require the U.S. ensure the island can maintain a credible defense and regard threats to the island as matters of "grave concern."

The U.S. has also sought to convince Taiwan's remaining allies of the wisdom of maintaining formal diplomatic ties, meeting with Pacific island nations on the topic after the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched relations to Beijing in 2019. State Department spokesperson Ned Price this week said Ortega's decision "deprives Nicaragua's people of a steadfast partner in its democratic and economic growth," and

	that the U.S. encourages “all countries that value democratic institutions, transparency, the rule of law, and promoting economic prosperity for their citizens to expand engagement with Taiwan.”
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Iran nuclear talks resume in Vienna</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/talks-iran-nuclear-deal-resume-vienna-amid-tensions-81646666">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/talks-iran-nuclear-deal-resume-vienna-amid-tensions-81646666</a>
GIST	<p>VIENNA -- Negotiations between Iran and world powers aimed at salvaging a tattered 2015 nuclear deal resumed in Vienna on Thursday, with tensions high after Tehran made demands last week that European countries strongly criticized. The talks' chairman said he detected “a renewed sense of purpose.”</p> <p>Diplomats from Britain, France and Germany had urged Tehran to come back with “realistic proposals” after the Iranian delegation made numerous demands last week that other parties to the accord deemed unacceptable. Last week’s talks were the first in over five months, a gap caused by a new hard-line government assuming power in Tehran.</p> <p>European Union diplomat Enrique Mora, who chaired Thursday's meeting of all the deal's remaining signatories — Iran, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China — said afterward that he felt “a renewed sense of purpose on the need to work and to reach an agreement on bringing the (agreement) back to life.”</p> <p>“Whether that will be confirmed and endorsed by negotiations on the details, we will see in the coming days,” Mora said, adding that the positive impression “has to be tested.”</p> <p>He said that it is becoming “more imperative” with time to reach an agreement quickly.</p> <p>The United States has participated indirectly in the ongoing talks because it withdrew from the accord in 2018 under then-President Donald Trump. President Joe Biden has signaled that he wants to rejoin the deal.</p> <p>Washington plans to send a delegation led by Robert Malley, the special U.S. envoy for Iran, to Vienna over the weekend.</p> <p>White House press secretary Jen Psaki said later Thursday the U.S. has “made clear to Iran that the only path out of sanctions is through nuclear compliance.”</p> <p>“If diplomacy cannot get on track soon, and if Iran’s nuclear program continues to accelerate, then we will have no choice but to take additional measures to further restrict Iran’s revenue-producing sectors,” Psaki said. She added that she wouldn't get into “additional specifics” about that.</p> <p>The accord sealed in Vienna in 2015, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was meant to rein in Iran's nuclear program in return for loosened economic sanctions.</p> <p>Following the U.S. decision to withdraw and reimpose sanctions against Iran, Tehran has ramped up its nuclear program again by enriching uranium beyond the thresholds allowed in the agreement. Iran has also restricted monitors from the U.N. atomic watchdog from accessing its nuclear facilities, raising concerns about what the country is doing out of view.</p> <p>Russia's delegate to the talks, Mikhail Ulyanov, described Thursday's talks as “constructive” and tweeted that there were “important commonalities,” including on a need to conclude the talks quickly and successfully.</p> <p>Mora said participants are approaching the task “with the realism necessary to get an agreement, because it’s difficult, because there are different positions, because some points are still extremely open.”</p> <p>“We have to close them, and we don’t have all the time of the world,” he said.</p>

HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Russia military warns Ukraine: stop attacks</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/russia-warns-kyiv-force-rebel-regions-81647932">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/russia-warns-kyiv-force-rebel-regions-81647932</a>
GIST	<p>MOSCOW -- Russia's top military officer on Thursday sternly warned neighboring Ukraine against trying to reclaim control over separatist areas by force, saying that Moscow will “suppress” any such attempt.</p> <p>The statement by Gen. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian military's General Staff, comes amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near the border with Ukraine that stoked Ukrainian and Western fears of a possible invasion.</p> <p>A senior Russian diplomat doubled down on Gerasimov's warning by saying that the failure to stem the mounting tensions could push Russia and the West to a redux of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis that put the world on the verge of a nuclear war.</p> <p>Tension briefly rose later Thursday when Russia’s Federal Security Service said a Ukrainian navy ship was heading toward the Kerch Strait between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea, ignoring Russian coast guard vessels’ signals. The FSB charged that maneuvering by the Ukrainian ship Donbas jeopardized navigation safety. The agency reported later that the ship changed course and sailed away from the Kerch Strait.</p> <p>The Ukrainian military dismissed the Russian claims, saying the Donbas didn't come anywhere close to any “sensitive” areas and was now heading back to its base. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov denounced the Russian report as “manipulations,” expressing surprise that Moscow saw the unarmed vessel as a threat.</p> <p>Moscow demands that all ships passing through the narrow strait that separates the Russia-annexed Crimea from Russia’s Taman Peninsula notify Russian authorities, citing the need to ensure the safety of navigation.</p> <p>In November 2018, Russian coast guard ships opened fire on three Ukrainian ships near the strait and then seized them. Ukraine insisted the vessels were in international waters when Russia intercepted them.</p> <p>U.S. President Joe Biden warned his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in a video call Tuesday that the West would respond with bruising economic sanctions that would inflict acute pain on Moscow if it invades Ukraine. At the same time, Biden made it clear Wednesday that U.S. troops wouldn't be sent to Ukraine to confront the Russians, and announced future talks between the U.S., its top NATO allies and Russia to address some of Moscow's security concerns.</p> <p>Russia has rejected Ukrainian and Western claims of plotting an attack and described them as a cover-up for a possible attempt by Ukraine to retake the rebel-held areas. Ukraine has denied such plans.</p> <p>On Thursday, Gerasimov reinforced Moscow's warning to Ukraine not to try to use force to reclaim control of the east, saying that “any provocations by Ukrainian authorities to settle the Donbas problems by force will be suppressed.”</p> <p>U.S. intelligence officials say Russia has stationed about 70,000 troops near its border with Ukraine and has begun planning for a possible invasion as soon as early next year.</p> <p>British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace told a press briefing in Stockholm that “President Putin would face a severe economic response, a severe diplomatic response from the international community” if he launches an attack on Ukraine. “I don’t think Russia wants those consequences, I don’t think it will help everyone, especially at this time with COVID, for these things to play out,” he added.</p>

Speaking to foreign military attaches, Gerasimov dismissed Western concerns about the Russian military buildup, arguing that Moscow is free to deploy its troops wherever it likes on its territory and calling the claim of a possible Russian invasion “a lie.”

He charged that Ukraine is to blame for escalating tensions in its war-torn eastern industrial heartland, known as Donbas, by deploying new weapons there, including U.S.-supplied Javelin anti-tank missiles and Turkish drones.

Russia and Ukraine have been locked in a bitter tug-of-war since 2014, when Moscow annexed the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula and threw its support behind a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine that has killed more than 14,000 people. Ukraine and the West accused Russia of sending troops and weapons to back the separatists, which Moscow has repeatedly denied.

Gerasimov complained about NATO's growing presence near Russian borders and the increasing number and scope of drills by alliance troops. He particularly noted an increase in patrol flights by U.S. strategic bombers near Russian territory, saying they practiced launching cruise missiles at targets in Russia.

In remarks that followed up on Putin's push for Western security guarantees to preclude NATO's expansion to Ukraine and other ex-Soviet neighbors, Gerasimov said Moscow is open to discussions on European and global security to “de-escalate tensions and increase the level of mutual trust.”

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov also voiced hope that the U.S. and its NATO allies would listen to Moscow's security concerns and engage in meaningful discussions.

“It primarily refers to refraining from military activities near our borders and the development of military and military-technical presence in those territories,” Ryabkov said during a panel discussion on international affairs.

He emphasized that Russia wants legally-binding guarantees of its security, noting that Western powers broke verbal promises — given to Moscow in the early 1990s — that NATO wouldn't expand eastward.

“There is a deep crisis in the Euro-Atlantic region that is fraught with a potential conflict,” Ryabkov said, adding that a controversy similar in scope to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis between the U.S. and the Soviet Union couldn't be excluded.

The Cuban Missile Crisis erupted when the Soviet Union deployed its missiles to Cuba and the U.S. imposed a naval blockade of the island. U.S. President John F. Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev agreed to defuse tensions by making a deal for Moscow to withdraw its missiles in exchange for Washington's pledge not to invade Cuba and the removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey.

“If the other side doesn't get it and it continues like it goes now, the logic of developments could lead us to suddenly waking up to something like that,” Ryabkov. “It may easily come to that. It would represent the failure of diplomacy, but there is still time to try to reach agreements based on common sense.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Columbus OH \$5.75M payout to protesters</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/ohio-capital-city-pay-575-million-injured-protesters-81660034">https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/ohio-capital-city-pay-575-million-injured-protesters-81660034</a>
GIST	<p>COLUMBUS, Ohio -- Ohio's capital city has agreed to pay \$5.75 million to people injured during last year's racial injustice and police brutality protests, plaintiffs' lawyers and city officials said Thursday.</p> <p>The payouts will vary based on the extent of protesters' individual injuries, and will be determined during a series of private meetings with a special master hired to review each case, said John Marshall, the lead attorney in the federal lawsuit brought by 32 injured protesters against Columbus. At least three plaintiffs said they suffered broken bones.</p>

The settlement also finalizes details of a federal judge's ruling earlier this year that ordered Columbus police to stop using nonlethal force such as tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets on nonviolent protesters who aren't harming people or destroying property.

The settlement announced Thursday “mandates that peaceful protestors on city streets and sidewalks cannot be subjected to uses of force, arrests, or dispersal orders except in extraordinary circumstances,” Marshall said. It also provides protections for street medics, journalists, and legal observers, he said.

Columbus City Council is expected to approve the financial settlement next week.

At issue in the federal lawsuit was the city’s response to protests that began in late May after the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who earlier this year was convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter.

Lead plaintiff Tammy Fournier Alsaada, a community activist, was pepper-sprayed without provocation after receiving permission to walk through a line of police to discuss the arrests of some protesters, according to the July 2020 lawsuit filed by the injured protesters.

Another plaintiff, Terry Hubby Jr., testified that he joined a May 29 protest and was struck by a nonlethal police projectile that shattered his knee, requiring surgery and the insertion of 20 pins and a plate. Video of the incident revealed that officers fired the projectiles while a police loud system issued an order to disperse.

Police also testified about facing chaotic and threatening situations.

“People were walking up to us with bottles and opening them and throwing, like, unknown liquids on us, yelling in our face,” Officer Anthony Johnson said, according to court documents.

Gino Brogdon Sr., a retired Georgia judge, will serve as special master determining the individual payouts. Brogdon also negotiated the historic \$10 million settlement the city is providing the family of Andre Hill, a Black man shot a year ago by a Columbus police officer as Hill walked out of a garage holding a cell phone. Adam Coy, the since-fired officer, who is white, has pleaded not guilty to murder and is scheduled for trial next year.

Columbus protests lasted multiple days downtown, near Ohio State University, and across other parts of the city. The first night, protesters smashed windows at the Ohio Statehouse and businesses throughout downtown.

In a separate episode, U.S. Rep. Joyce Beatty was hit by pepper spray as scuffles broke out near the end of a May demonstration.

A report released last spring that Columbus was unprepared for the size and energy of the protests and that most police officers felt abandoned by city leadership during that time. The report, commissioned by the city council, also found the city had no advance plan for handling such protests, and suffered from a lack of coordination and even regular communication among city leaders once the protests began.

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## Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	12/09 Hackers bypass 2FA via push notifications
SOURCE	<a href="https://therecord.media/russian-hackers-bypass-2fa-by-annoying-victims-with-repeated-push-notifications/">https://therecord.media/russian-hackers-bypass-2fa-by-annoying-victims-with-repeated-push-notifications/</a>



Nobelium, the Russian cyber-espionage group that has orchestrated the SolarWinds 2020 supply chain attack, has continued to carry out new attacks throughout 2021, and according to security firm Mandiant, has been using a clever trick to bypass two-factor authentication in order to access some of its targets' accounts.

The technique, detailed in a [report](#) published on Monday, involves abusing the push notification feature of some online accounts.

2FA (two-factor authentication) or MFA (multi-factor authentication) push notifications are typically used as an alternative to receiving one-time codes via SMS or email, and they take the form of a popup that appears on a smartphone.

When a user logs into an account with valid credentials, a push notification is shown on their smartphone, with details about the type and IP address of the device trying to access the account and asking for permission to allow the operation to go through.

2FA push notifications aren't widely adopted, but they are considered safer than email or SMS as a 2FA method because attackers would need physical access to a victim's smartphone in order to bypass it.

But on Monday, Mandiant researchers said they'd investigated several incidents where Nobelium members gained access to a user's valid login credentials, and they repeatedly attempted to log into the account, triggering repeated 2FA push notifications on the victim's device until the target eventually accepted the request.

It is unclear if these victims accepted the push notification by accident; because they thought it might have been a bug; or by sheer annoyance.

Because Nobelium often uses IP proxies in the same geographical area as the victim to avoid triggering a target's scrutiny over login requests from strange IPs, this might explain why some victims accepted the attacker's into their accounts.

### **Nobelium continues to operate with advanced tradecraft**

All in all, the Mandiant report paints the picture of an apex threat actor that continues to showcase "top-notch operational security and advanced tradecraft," and will certainly not be defined by the SolarWinds hack as its sole successful operation.

Among the group's most recent tactics and operations, Mandiant also highlighted:

- Intrusions and compromises of multiple cloud providers, from where the group pivoted to their respective downstream customer systems.
- The use of login credentials most likely acquired from the black market, from the operators of the CRYPTBOT infostealer.
- The use of hacked accounts with Application Impersonation privileges [1, 2] to harvest sensitive mail data since Q1 2021.
- The extraction of virtual machines from compromised networks to determine internal routing configurations.
- The use of a new malware strain named CEELoader, as the initial entry point and used later to drop new malware binaries.
- The use of residential IP addresses ranges to authenticate into victim environments.
- The use of Azure servers to collect data that are geo-located in the same cloud zone as the victim network to avoid triggering security alerts.
- The use of hacked WordPress sites to store their malware.
- The extensive use of Tor, VPNs, and VPS servers to disguise their real location when conducting reconnaissance and attacks.
- Attempts to circumvent or delete system logging within the victim's environment.

	In April this year, the White House <a href="#">formally linked</a> the Nobelium threat actor to the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, also known as the <a href="#">SVR</a> , the same agency which security experts believe is behind the <a href="#">APT29 (Cozy Bear)</a> threat actor.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 South Australia govt. workers data stolen</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.zdnet.com/article/south-australian-government-employee-data-taken-in-frontier-software-ransomware-attack/">https://www.zdnet.com/article/south-australian-government-employee-data-taken-in-frontier-software-ransomware-attack/</a>
GIST	<p>South Australia Treasurer Rob Lucas said on Friday that state government employee data has been exfiltrated as part of a ransomware attack on payroll provider Frontier Software.</p> <p>Lucas said the company has informed government that some of the data have been published online, with at least 38,000 employees and up to 80,000 government employees possibly having their data accessed.</p> <p>The data contained information on names, date of birth, tax file number, home address, bank account details, employment start date, payroll period, remuneration, and other payroll-related information.</p> <p>"We can confirm that no Department for Education employees are affected," Lucas said in a <a href="#">statement</a>.</p> <p>"The government's priority is the safety and security of every employee affected by this incident, and we are doing all we can to provide assistance to impacted employees."</p> <p>Frontier Software has been handling payroll for South Australia since 2001.</p> <p>On its <a href="#">site</a>, the government states it "undertakes regular independent security tests and reviews" of Frontier Software.</p> <p>Last month, Frontier Software was attacked on November 13 and alerted its customers to what it labelled as a "cyber incident" on November 16. It said its systems were restored on November 17.</p> <p>"To date, our investigations show no evidence of any customer data being exfiltrated or stolen. Whilst the incident resulted in some of Frontier Software's Australian corporate systems being encrypted, Australian customer HR &amp; Payroll data and systems are segmented from the corporate systems and were not compromised," it said on November 17.</p> <p>On Thursday, the company sang a different tune.</p> <p>"The ongoing forensic investigation and other response activities conducted by Frontier Software and CyberCX has now confirmed evidence of some data exfiltration from Frontier Software's internal Australian corporate environment," it said.</p> <p>"We have not identified evidence of compromise or exfiltration outside this segmented environment.</p> <p>"We have further identified that some of the data exfiltrated from our internal corporate environment relates to a small number of Frontier Software customers. We are now in the process of directly notifying these customers that they may be affected."</p> <p>During November, the <i>ABC</i> reported Federal Group, the owners of Hobart's Wrest Point casino, had to make <a href="#">advance payments of AU\$250 to staff</a> due to the attack on Frontier Software.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Decade-old malware nasty new tricks</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.zdnet.com/article/this-decade-old-malware-has-picked-up-some-nasty-new-tricks/">https://www.zdnet.com/article/this-decade-old-malware-has-picked-up-some-nasty-new-tricks/</a>

Qakbot, a top trojan for stealing bank credentials, has in the past year started delivering ransomware and this new business model is making it harder for network defenders to detect what is and isn't a Qakbot attack.

Qakbot, is an especially versatile piece of malware, and has been around for over a decade and survived despite multi-year efforts by Microsoft and other security firms to stamp it out. Qakbot in 2017 [adopted WannaCry's lateral movement techniques](#), such as infecting all network shares and drives, brute forcing Active Directory accounts and using the SMB file-sharing protocol to create copies of itself.

Kaspersky's [recent analysis of Qakbot](#) concluded that it won't disappear anytime soon. Its detection statistics for Qakbot indicated it had infected 65% more PCs between January to July 2021 compared to the same period in the previous year. So, it is a growing threat.

Microsoft highlights that Qakbot is modular, allowing it to appear as separate attacks on each device on a network, making it difficult for defenders and security tools to detect, prevent and remove. It's also difficult for defenders to detect because Qakbot is used to distribute multiple variants of ransomware.

"Due to Qakbot's high likelihood of transitioning to human-operated attack behaviors including data exfiltration, lateral movement, and ransomware by multiple actors, the detections seen after infection can vary widely," [the Microsoft 365 Defender Threat Intelligence Team say in its report](#).

Given these difficulties pinpointing a common Qakbot campaign, the Microsoft team has profiled the malware's techniques and behaviors to help security analysts root out this versatile malware.

The primary delivery mechanism is emailed attachments, links, or embedded images. However, it's also known to use Visual Basic for Applications (VBA) macros as well as legacy Excel 4.0 macros to infect machines.

TrendMicro [analyzed a large Qakbot campaign in July](#) that used this technique.

Other groups like Trickbot recently started using Excel 4.0 macros [to call Win32 APIs and run shell commands](#). As a result, Microsoft disabled these macro types by default, but Qakbot uses text in an Excel document to trick targets into manually enabling the macro.

Qakbot employs process injection to hide malicious processes, creating scheduled tasks to persist on a machine, and manipulating the Windows registry.

Once running on an infected device, it uses multiple techniques for lateral movement, employs the Cobalt Strike penetration-testing framework, or deploys ransomware.

The FBI last year [warned that Qakbot trojans](#) were delivering ProLock, a "human-operated ransomware" variant. It was a worrying development because computers infected with Qakbot on a network must be isolated because they're a bridge for a ransomware attack.

Microsoft notes MSRA.exe and Mobsync.exe have been used by Qakbot for this process injection in order to run several network 'discovery' commands and then steal Windows credentials and browser data.

Qakbot's Cobalt Strike module lends itself to other criminal gangs who can drop their own payloads, such as ransomware. Per Trend Micro, Qakbot has delivered MegaCortex and PwndLocker (2019), Egregor, and ProLock (2020), and Sodinokibi/REvil (2021).

"Qakbot has a Cobalt Strike module, and actors who purchase access to machines with prior Qakbot infections may also drop their own Cobalt Strike beacons and additional payloads," Microsoft notes.

	<p>"Using Cobalt Strike lets attackers have full hands-on-keyboard access to the affected devices, enabling them to perform additional discovery, find high-value targets on the network, move laterally, and drop additional payloads, especially human-operated ransomware variants such as Conti and Egregor."</p> <p>Microsoft's recommended mitigations to minimize Qakbot's impact include enabling Office 365 phishing protection, enabling SmartScreen and network in the Edge browser, and ensuring runtime macro scanning by turning Windows Antimalware Scan Interface (AMSI) on.</p> <p>AMSI is supported by Microsoft Defender antivirus and several third-party antivirus vendors. AMSI <a href="#">support for Excel 4.0 macros arrived in March</a>, so it's still a relatively new feature.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Remote-working job surveillance on rise</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.zdnet.com/article/remote-working-job-surveillance-is-on-the-rise-for-some-the-impact-could-be-devastating/">https://www.zdnet.com/article/remote-working-job-surveillance-is-on-the-rise-for-some-the-impact-could-be-devastating/</a>
GIST	<p>Remote-monitoring and surveillance tools could devastate employee relations unless efforts are made to put more power into the hands of workers, the author of a report by the European Commission's Joint Research Council (JRC) warns.</p> <p>Kirstie Ball, who spent five months compiling the JRC's extensive <a href="#">Electronic Monitoring and Surveillance in the Workplace</a> report, says an increase in employee surveillance threatens to undermine trust and commitment to work amongst staff who are left in the dark about why and how data on them is gathered.</p> <p>A spike in the use of "quick and dirty" monitoring apps <a href="#">prompted by pandemic-era remote working</a> is especially concerning, Ball tells ZDNet, particularly those who use more invasive techniques to snoop on people working in their own homes.</p> <p>These tools threaten the mental wellbeing of workers upon whom the <a href="#">COVID-19 pandemic</a> has already taken a significant psychological toll. "One of the difficulties with remote working is that a lot of people were dropped into remote working very quickly," the University of St Andrews professor says.</p> <p>"In the pandemic, your house was everything. It was where you worshipped, it was where you worked and your school. If you drop invasive monitoring on top of all that, it's just going to be devastating to people when they don't have support and are isolated in their homes."</p> <p>The JRC report, based on findings from some 400 articles, found that workplace surveillance has grown more pervasive through the 'datafication' of work, particularly with the expansion of algorithmic platforms used widely in the gig economy by companies like Uber, Deliveroo and Amazon.</p> <p>Often, gig workers rely entirely on algorithms to judge their performance and reward them accordingly. This reliance on technology, combined with a lack of autonomy and managerial support, poses significant psychosocial risks to gig workers.</p> <p>"What we have is heavily datafied work; surveillance algorithms allocating work and rewarding work, and there is no human contact to mitigate it," says Ball.</p> <p>"For some platform workers, that's fine, because they only do it to earn a bit of money from a hobby, or as a part-time top-up of their income. But for those who rely on it, it's very, very difficult."</p> <p><b>THE CONTROL CHALLENGE</b></p> <p>Remote working during the pandemic has also seen an increase in the use of monitoring technologies, some of which – such as email monitoring, biometrics, wearables, and webcam and screen recording – prompt a "very strong sense of privacy invasiveness" amongst workers.</p>

In November, a committee of MPs and peers warned that [tougher regulations are needed around the use of AI decision-making](#) tools in the workplace to counteract the "pronounced negative impacts" that constant monitoring and micromanagement has on employee wellbeing.

Ball acknowledges that the urgency of 2020's work-from-home orders might have led some organizations to implement employee-monitoring tools arbitrarily as a solution to the management challenge it presented.

"When it's quick and cheap, it is going to be a temptation. Because at the end of the day, the remote working [during the pandemic] did present a control challenge. How do you keep track of people? You want to keep them in a job, but how do you keep track of what they're doing? How do you understand what they're doing?"

However, Ball says that technology is not a replacement for proper management techniques: "If you're a manager in an organization who is trying to suddenly scramble to work from home and you've been given technology that tells you what your colleagues are doing at their desks, and take pictures of them, that might be seen as a surrogate for the performance side of it. It's not."

Even as surveillance creeps into employees' homes, workers are being left in the dark about the exact nature and intention of the data being gathered on them. This situation threatens to erode trust and create resistance from employees, driving turnover rates upwards at a time when many [workers are already thinking about leaving their jobs](#).

"The main problem with workplace surveillance is that people can sometimes feel it's either invasive, authoritarian or excessive," says Ball.

"When people start to feel that way about the surveillance that they're subject to, they get a sense that work conditions are less fair and less just, they have lower job satisfaction, they have lower commitment, they have lower creativity and autonomy, and they feel they're not trusted. Their stress levels go up, and what that means is that they are more likely to quit."

## **THE CREEPS**

Function creep is another problem presented by monitoring technologies, whereby employers gradually begin to gather more data on their workers that goes beyond what is necessary.

This issue has also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 health crisis, with some organizations having rushed to deploy remote management and monitoring tools without robust policies or clear directives around their use.

"When people start to perceive surveillance as authoritarian intrusiveness... it can sometimes be because the purpose is not clear, or it's suspected that the purpose has been exceeded, or not properly communicated," says Ball.

The way that monitoring is perceived by people is also connected with how feedback is used. Organizations can determine a better course for surveillance tools – which Ball accepts "isn't going to go away" – by looking to empower employees, as opposed to questioning their ability to do their job or their moral integrity.

"The big question for me is whether it will ever be possible for organizations to make worker data available to workers and equip them with the skills and knowledge to look at the data... so that they themselves may start to make decisions about their own personal development and career development, rather than it just being harnessed by organizations to turn the screw?"

When it comes to the growth of AI-driven decision making in the workplace, organizations should be wary of the very real issue of data bias and discrimination. Interrogating decisions made by algorithms should likewise be held to very high scrutiny, argues Ball.

"There should be more of a culture of actually questioning these outputs and interrogating them, in terms of their consequences and veracity... we need to be transparent about how our data is processed, we need to know that it's not a dangerous or harmful process, and discuss it and challenge it if we wish."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Grinchbots aggressively surge in activity</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://threatpost.com/pandemic-grinchbots-surge-activity/176898/">https://threatpost.com/pandemic-grinchbots-surge-activity/176898/</a>
GIST	<p>The festive season is moving into full swing, and so is holiday shopping – including special product launches and sales. But just as we collectively look forward to leisurely browsing for deals from the couch, perhaps with a mug of hot cocoa, “grinchbots” have emerged to burn it all down.</p> <p>According to Imperva Research Labs, advanced bot traffic sessions on retail sites in November spiked a shocking 73 percent over the previous month, and there’s no sign of the activity subsiding, even if Black Friday and Cyber Monday have come and gone.</p> <p>In general, the proportion of bot traffic on retail sites this year is 13 percent higher than in 2020, the firm found, and the majority (57 percent) of attacks recorded on e-commerce websites this year were carried out by bots. In comparison, bots were to blame for just 33 percent of the total attacks on websites in all other industries in 2021.</p> <p>As background, grinchbots are automated bots that query online inventories and purchase desired goods, looking to take advantage of sales events and special product launches. Just like the closely related <a href="#">sneakerbot phenomenon</a>, their human operators (who presumably have three-sizes-too-small hearts) look to clean out online stores of hot items, so they can resell them at a steep upcharge later.</p> <p>Grinchbots target the holidays for obvious reasons; more demand means more margin, plus there are more limited-edition goods to capitalize on, including toys, GPUs, gaming goods, apparel, jewelry and more.</p> <p>It’s a type of fraud that has real-world consequences for any gifting plans consumers may have. For instance, last season, grinchbots were responsible for a <a href="#">nationwide shortage</a> of PlayStation 5 gaming consoles – they were only available from third-party resellers for double or more their retail price, far out of the price range of most American families.</p> <p>“Because the automation is faster and more efficient than a human, legitimate human users don’t stand a chance at getting their hands on the latest, most desired commodities,” explained researchers at Imperva, in a <a href="#">Wednesday posting</a>.</p> <p>Amid the data, Imperva found that bot traffic continued to spike the week after Cyber Monday this year, growing 8 percent from the prior week; and that’s after traffic had already spiked 48 percent between Thanksgiving Day and Black Friday.</p> <p>“The 2021 holiday shopping season is shaping up to be a nightmare for both retailers and consumers,” Peter Klimek, director of technology at the office of the CTO at Imperva, said via email. “With the global supply-chain conditions worsening, retailers will not only struggle to get products to sell in Q4, but will face increased attacks from motivated cybercriminals who want to benefit from the chaos.”</p> <p>Online retailers continue to implement controls to weed out Christmas-hating bot traffic, and the bot operators continue to find ways to evade them. Some take elaborate measures in service to their grinchy cause, starting with setting up fake email accounts.</p> <p>“Once a threat actor has created enough email addresses and ‘farmed’ them to look like real people by sending emails, watching YouTube videos and in general, acting like a human, they then go set up accounts on the desired platforms for the purpose of making purchases of the next item to drop,” explained</p>



Jason Kent, hacker-in-residence at Cequence Security, in a recent [Threatpost column](#). “This means these platforms have hundreds of accounts that are simply controlled by the threat actor.”

Saryu Nayyar also [noted for Threatpost](#) that mimicking human behavior during the shopping process itself allows grinchbots to evade static rules engines that perform behavioral analysis to identify bot transactions.

“One technique is to mimic a typical online shopping pattern, where someone scrolls through multiple product pages, and might even use a ‘compare these products’ tool or look at product reviews,” she explained. “Then, a big-ticket item is placed in the cart and purchased with the purloined payment information. By looking like a typical purchase process, the fraudster makes the behavior less suspicious and skirts rule-based detection.”

### **Gift Card Grinches**

If shoppers can’t get coveted items at the MSRP, there are always gift cards to fall back on, right? Well, not really, researchers say.

Grinchbots are also branching out, taking not only the gifts from under people’s trees but also the Roast Beast, so to speak: Increasingly they’re turning their sights to gift cards, according to security firm Kasada.

This involves gift-card cracking, which involves bombarding online sites with millions of combinations of digits to identify active cards that hold value. Once the bots crack a valid gift card, the operators can transfer the stored value or use the cards to purchase goods, researchers explained.

“The gift cards are depleted (the money is gone) before the intended recipient of the card has a chance to use it,” according to the firm, in data shared with Threatpost.

In one of the key indicators that bad bots are hard at work on this front, Kasada has seen automated gift card balance lookups quadruple for their retail customers over the past two months.

The gift-card frenzy is driven by broader economic realities: “Gift cards are now even more desirable to shoppers and retailers struggling with supply-chain delays and labor shortages,” according to Kasada. “Shoppers plan to boost gift-card spending this holiday season, making them about 40 percent of their total gift purchases, according to a [recent survey](#).”

### **Congress Takes on Grinch Bots**

As grinchbots continue taking gifts up the side of their own personal Mt. Crumpet, Congress has introduced the “Stopping Grinch Bots Act” ([PDF](#)) to “prevent scalpers from sucking hard-working parents dry this holiday season,” according to bill sponsor Rep. Paul Tonko (D-N.Y.). But Imperva researchers noted that enforcing any resulting law on a borderless internet will be challenging.

“While the efforts of U.S. lawmakers are respectable and the industry should support them, the bot problem is complex and will be hard to stop altogether,” Klimek said. “Bot operators are motivated because their efforts are generating a substantial income and funding their lifestyles. Domestic legislation will not stop bot operators from finding loopholes – like deploying automated scripts from servers in other jurisdictions.”

He added that there are also legal ramifications that could impact the viability of the bill: “It will be challenging for third-party marketplaces to adequately determine when they should know if a product or service was acquired through inventory hoarding practices. Expect pushback from the trade groups that operate these marketplaces as this bill would make them liable for the behavior of their sellers.”

### **How to Fight the Grinchbots**

For now, online merchants should invest in a multilayered security approach that spans applications and application programming interfaces (APIs) as well as back-end data and everything in-between, according to Imperva. APIs in particular should be a focus, researchers noted.



“[APIs] are essential for retailers as they improve the e-commerce experience for shoppers,” according to Imperva. “APIs connect consumers to data and information they need – like inventory availability, product search, order fulfillment tracking and more. However, APIs, like JavaScript services, are difficult to monitor and highly vulnerable to attack.”

Protecting the client side is critical as well, researchers said, which usually entails employing third-party services that operate outside of the security team’s control.

“Common website functionality like chatbots, payment services and web analytics are enabled by third-party JavaScript that executes on the client side,” explained the firm. “The functionality is a necessity for e-commerce, but is increasingly vulnerable to attack. If not properly secured, the compromise of third-party JavaScript code can lead to cross-site scripting (XSS), formjacking, cryptojacking, malicious ad injection, data skimming and more.”

Nayyar also recommended bringing in the big guns: machine learning and artificial intelligence.

“Today’s cloud-based advanced fraud analytics platforms utilize Big-Data architecture, machine learning, artificial intelligence and behavioral analytics to dig through millions of transactions and billions of data points from cross-channel sources to get a full contextual view of transactions and detect anomalous signals and activities in real time,” she said. “Such platforms can provide accurate, prioritized risk assessments that enable decision-making and allow mitigations to be triggered in time to prevent the losses.”

As for consumers, there could be difficult shopping times ahead, but perhaps the spirit of the season will prevail anyway. As the Grinch once noted, the holidays are about more than shopping: “It came without ribbons, it came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags.”

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HEADLINE	12/09 US, Canada duel probes lead to arrest
SOURCE	<a href="https://threatpost.com/canadian-ransomware-arrest/176905/">https://threatpost.com/canadian-ransomware-arrest/176905/</a>
GIST	<p>Investigations that ran in parallel over nearly two years by Canadian and U.S. law enforcement have led to this week’s arrest of an Ottawa man, who is alleged to have an extensive track record of ransomware attacks on companies, governments and individuals.</p> <p>The highly-publicized arrest is a message to North American ransomware operators — law enforcement is on the case.</p> <p>The U.S. charges are focused on a specific <a href="#">attack on a computer owned by the State of Alaska</a>, but Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) Detective Inspector characterized 31-year-old Matthew Philbert as “the <a href="#">most prolific cybercriminal</a> we’ve identified to date,” in an exclusive interview with Krebs on Security.</p> <p>Canadian authorities have charged Philbert with fraud, using a computer to commit mischief and unauthorized use of a computer.</p> <p><b>Project CODA</b></p> <p>The OPP joined with the FBI for a press conference following the arrest, which is part of a joint <a href="#">cybercrime task force called CODA</a>.</p> <p>“The FBI alongside our international partners, OPP and RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police), will continue to investigate these malicious cyber-actors who continue to target U.S. and Canadian infrastructure,” Abellera said. “We will hold these criminals responsible for trying to exploit and threaten these industries. We will impose risk and consequence by leveraging all of the tools in our toolbelt especially our partnerships to ensure these perpetrators are brought to justice.”</p>

This is a significant signal to cybercriminals operating in North America, who are rarely held accountable for their crimes, according to John Bambenek, principal threat hunter with Netenrich.

“With so many cybercriminals not facing any consequences, any arrest is a big deal, especially when it is someone operating in North America,” Bambenek told Threatpost. “Given both the level of international cooperation required and obtained, and the scope of this individual’s criminal career, the arrest is welcome news.”

While Canada hasn’t historically been tough on cybercrime, Malwarebytes’ Jerome Segura pointed to the January arrest of a Canadian man living in Florida who the Department of Justice said was behind the [Netwalker ransomware attacks](#); and penalties assessed by the country’s regulatory authority over malicious advertising, or [malvertising](#) practices, as signals that the country is starting to crack down.

“While Canada may not always brag or get recognition for its cyber-efforts, government entities and private companies have taken part in significant cases over time,” Segura told Threatpost. “Having said that, ongoing global cooperation and especially cooperation between the U.S. and Canada in the fight against cybercrime is a positive sign that online criminals can and will be prosecuted.”

### **Enforcement Messaging to Deter Ransomware Attacks**

Messaging is an important part of deterring future ransomware attacks, Tim Wade, CTO of Vectra AI told Threatpost.

“Destroying the ransomware supply chain involves disincentivizing participation,” Wade explained. “An extremely effective way to disincentivize participation is to make clear that there are no safe havens, the activities are not overlooked and justice will be served. This development appears to check the box on all three of those fronts.”

Just days ago, Gen. Paul Nakasone, who heads up the U.S. military’s Cyber Command unit, publicly admitted they will go after any [ransomware actors who target American companies](#).

The ratcheting up of enforcement and rhetoric comes amid record-breaking damage being inflicted on businesses. Thanks to easy access to ransomware tools through ransomware-as-a-service providers and how easy organizations make it to break into their systems, the cybercrime business is booming. Group-IB just released a report that found a 935 percent spike in [ransomware damage](#) over the past year alone.

### **Governments Headed in ‘New Direction’**

“Where the true significance lies is in the actions being taken — it seems like the U.S., Canada and international governments in general are taking the ransomware threat more seriously,” Jaron Bradley, detections lead at Jamf, said in reaction to the news of the arrest. “Federal law enforcement agencies taking a more aggressive stance in going after the bad guys means we’re heading in a new direction.”

FBI attaché Brian Abellera used the press conference announcing the Philbert arrest as an opportunity to warn other cybercriminals this arrest is just “one of many to come.”

### **Organized Crime Might Benefit**

And while individual private ransomware operators will likely feel the heat of the international cop crackdown, Dane Sherrets warned this could provide an opportunity for organized crime to increase their market share.

“Any action by law enforcement against cybercriminals is a step in the right direction for deterrence — especially when they catch a cybercriminal,” Sherrets told Threatpost. “There’s no doubt we will see more organized criminal groups, like Darkode, proliferating but this arrest is a sign that law enforcement is becoming savvier and more dedicated to identifying cybercriminals.”

Organized crime rings have the benefit of being able to operate anywhere in the world to evade arrest, Sherrets added, meaning there’s still work to be done.

	“In order to make a significant impact to eliminate these kinds of organizations we will need a concerted international effort between the security community, governments and organizations,” Sherrets said.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Holidays put companies at risk for attack</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/why-holidays-put-your-company-at-risk.html">https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/why-holidays-put-your-company-at-risk.html</a>
GIST	<p>It is a time when many are thinking of their families and loved ones, time off work, and gift-giving – the holidays. However, while many have their minds outside the realm of work during the holiday season, often, this is when attackers plan their most sinister attacks.</p> <p>So how can you take precautions to protect your organization during these times?</p> <p><b>Why holidays put your company at risk of cyberattack</b></p> <p>Attackers today do not have a soft spot for businesses and give companies a break at any time of the year, especially not during holidays. On the contrary, any time of the year where companies may be less prepared to fend off a cyberattack is an opportunity for successful compromise. As a result, the holidays put your company at a higher risk of cyberattack.</p> <p>Most end-users do not think about cybersecurity when surfing the web or receiving emails with holiday deals during the season. As a result, many let their guard down to a certain degree and become preoccupied and distracted more than usual. Increased distraction from the end-user perspective and less scrutiny of emails and websites where holiday discounts and offers may be displayed can provide the perfect opportunity for attackers using phishing scams or malicious advertisements.</p> <p>Additionally, IT operations and SecOps teams may be short-staffed with staff out on vacation during the holidays. It creates a situation of increased risk to business-critical data with potentially fewer resources to help mitigate risks and breaches if they happen.</p> <p>Earlier this year, the FBI and Cybersecurity &amp; Infrastructure Security Agency released a general alert for increased vigilance for ransomware attacks during holidays. You can read the warning here: <a href="#">Ransomware Awareness for Holidays and Weekends   CISA</a>. In part, it states:</p> <p><i>"The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) have observed an increase in highly impactful ransomware attacks occurring on holidays and weekends—when offices are normally closed—in the United States, as recently as the Fourth of July holiday in 2021."</i></p> <p>With upcoming holidays in the U.S. and worldwide, organizations must remain vigilant and on guard to protect against many forms of attack. Let's look at the following common cybersecurity risks during this holiday season:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ransomware</li> <li>• Phishing email</li> <li>• Data breach</li> <li>• Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS)</li> <li>• Breached passwords</li> </ul> <p><b>1 - Ransomware</b></p> <p>Ransomware is by far one of the most sinister threats to organizations and their data today. With the increased threat of successful phishing attacks and visits to malicious websites, the chances of your business getting infected with ransomware drastically increase.</p> <p>Threat actors may entice users to click on a malicious link in a phishing email or perform a drive-by attack using malicious web code on a hijacked website. Either way, it can be a gateway for ransomware infection. Note the following ransomware attacks over a holiday:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memorial Day – ransomware attack on <a href="#">meat processing giant JBS</a>.</li> </ul>

- Fourth of July – ransomware attack on [IT management software company Kaseya](#)

To protect against ransomware, organizations must put the appropriate security measures in place, including:

- Phishing email filtering
- Strong password policies and breached password protection
- Least privilege access
- Micro-segmentation
- Application whitelisting
- Other security measures

Is ransomware costly to businesses? According to the [IBM Cost of a Data Breach 2021 report](#), ransomware is highly costly to your business:

*Ransomware attacks cost an average of \$4.62 million, more expensive than the average data breach (\$4.24 million). These costs included escalation, notification, lost business, and response costs, but did not include the cost of the ransom. Malicious attacks that destroyed data in destructive wiper-style attacks cost an average of \$4.69 million. The percentage of companies where ransomware was a factor in the breach was 7.8%.*

## 2 - Phishing email

One of the easy ways that attackers can compromise environments is by using phishing emails. Phishing emails masquerade as communications from legitimate companies. Attackers have become proficient in making phishing emails appear legitimate, from the logos, wording, images, and other styling associated with the email.

Without appropriate security protections in place, an end-user simply must click on the malicious link, and the damage begins. For example, suppose there are no zero-trust or micro-segmentation boundaries in place. In that case, the ransomware can freely crawl across the network and infect anything on which the user has "write" or "modify" permissions.

During the holiday season, end-users are generally "click-happy" and may not scrutinize emails and other communications as closely. As a result, attackers may use the flood of email communications to infiltrate the organization's perimeter with a phishing attack.

Again, cybersecurity basics come into play to protect against phishing emails, like the protections listed for ransomware:

- Phishing email filtering
- End-user cybersecurity training
- Disallowed attachments

## 3 - Data breach

Data breaches are a critical cybersecurity threat for organizations worldwide. The implications and financial fall-out from a data breach event can be tremendous. The [IBM Cost of a Data Breach Report 2021](#) cites:

*Data breach costs increased significantly year-over year from the 2020 report to the 2021 report, increasing from \$3.86 million in 2020 to \$4.24 million in 2021. The increase of \$0.38 million (\$380,000) represents a 9.8% increase. This compares to a decrease of 1.5% from the 2019 to 2020 report year. The cost of a data breach has increase by 11.9% since 2015.*

Data breaches can occur intentionally, unintentionally, or due to malicious cyberattacks. For example, an employee may accidentally share data they shouldn't share or do this intentionally. In the holiday season, employees are more distracted with holiday plans or other activities and, by extension, more apt to expose data. Additionally, with the increased ransomware threat, the list of modern ransomware variants threatening data leaks is growing.

It includes:

- AKO
- AVADDON
- BABUK LOCKER
- CLOP
- CONTI
- CUBA
- DARKSIDE
- DOPPELPAYMER
- EGREGOR
- EVEREST
- LOCKBIT
- MAZE
- MESPINOZA
- MOUNT LOCKER
- NEFILIM
- NEMTY
- REVIL

#### 4 - Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks

Another threat for businesses around the holidays is Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks. According to the statistics, the volume of Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks increases around the holidays.

In addition, since the beginning of the global pandemic in 2020, online shopping and retail have increased dramatically as more individuals prefer online shopping.

Attackers know the damage caused by DDoS attacks now is more costly to businesses, especially around the lucrative holiday season.

According to current forecasts, DDoS attacks will reach a record 11 million by the end of 2021. Knowing this, organizations must design their network mitigations and server technologies with the ability to withstand more significant DDoS attacks.

#### 5 - Breached passwords

One of the most common ways attackers attempt to compromise environments is using compromised credentials. Obtaining compromised credentials is an easy, minimal effort attack vector that can lead to tremendous damage to business-critical data.

As mentioned, employees are more distracted and prove to be easier targets around the holidays. Phishing emails, aside from launching a ransomware attack, can be used to harvest legitimate credentials. A growing business on the dark web is *Initial Access Brokers*. The [Initial Access Broker](#) provides criminals with legitimate and verified user accounts for a price. It allows attackers to purchase credentials on the dark web, so the hard work of getting access to the environment is already complete.

According to the IBM Cost of a Data Breach Report 2021, compromised credentials were the most common initial attack vector, accounting for 20% of breaches. In addition, compromised credentials are among the costliest and lead to a longer data breach lifecycle than other types of data breaches as they are more challenging to detect. To combat this threat, organizations must bolster their password policies and implement adequate breached password protection.

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HEADLINE	12/09 Volume of attacks on IoT/OT increasing
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.securityweek.com/volume-attacks-iotot-devices-increasing-microsoft-study">https://www.securityweek.com/volume-attacks-iotot-devices-increasing-microsoft-study</a>
GIST	The volume of attacks on IoT and OT devices is increasing and in many cases these systems were specifically targeted by threat actors, according to a new study commissioned by Microsoft.

Forty-four percent of the more than 600 respondents who took part in a survey said their organization experienced a cyber incident that involved an IoT or OT device in the past two years. Thirty-nine percent said such a device was the target of the attack and 35% said the device was leveraged to conduct a broader attack — this includes lateral movement, detection evasion and persistence.

IoT and OT devices may be specifically targeted by attackers with the intent to cause disruption. One example provided by Microsoft involves human-operated ransomware attacks that disrupt production in an organization.

Half of respondents said the volume of attacks against IoT/OT devices in their organization “increased” or “significantly increased” in the past 12 to 24 months. Moreover, only less than 20% of respondents believe the volume of attacks will decrease in the upcoming period.

Many organizations are still not confident in their ability to protect their systems. Only less than one-third of the respondents who contributed to the Microsoft study said their organization has a complete inventory of devices, and 42% don’t have the ability to detect vulnerabilities affecting IoT and OT devices.

Moreover, 61% have low or average confidence when it comes to identifying compromised systems, and nearly half still mainly rely on manual processes to identify and correlate impacted devices.

Microsoft’s study also confirms that industrial systems are in many cases not isolated from the internet or the IT network. Roughly half of respondents said their OT network is connected to the corporate IT network, and 56% admitted that their OT network is directly connected to the internet.

While 55% of respondents believe IoT and OT products are not secure by design, 47% are relying on the manufacturer to secure these devices.

[The report](#) released by Microsoft is based on a survey of 615 IT, IT security, and OT security practitioners across the United States, conducted by the Ponemon Institute.

A survey conducted recently by Ponemon for industrial cybersecurity firm Dragos showed that some companies reported that the total cost of an ICS/OT incident [exceeded \\$100 million](#).

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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Saudi activist sues 3 former US officials</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.securityweek.com/saudi-activist-sues-3-former-us-officials-over-hacking">https://www.securityweek.com/saudi-activist-sues-3-former-us-officials-over-hacking</a>
GIST	<p>Loujain al-Hathloul, a prominent Saudi political activist who pushed to end a ban on women driving in her country, is suing three former U.S. intelligence and military officials she says helped hack her cellphone so a foreign government could spy on her before she was imprisoned and tortured.</p> <p>The nonprofit Electronic Frontier Foundation announced Thursday that it had <a href="#">filed a lawsuit</a> in U.S. federal court on al-Hathloul’s behalf against former U.S. officials Marc Baier, Ryan Adams and Daniel Gericke, as well as a cybersecurity company called DarkMatter that has contracted with the United Arab Emirates.</p> <p>In the lawsuit, al-Hathloul alleges that the trio oversaw a project for DarkMatter that hacked into her iPhone to track her location and steal information as part of broader surveillance efforts targeted at dissidents within the UAE and its close ally Saudi Arabia. She said the hacking of her phone led to her “arbitrary arrest by the UAE’s security services and rendition to Saudi Arabia, where she was detained, imprisoned, and tortured.”</p> <p>“Companies that peddle their surveillance software and services to oppressive governments must be held accountable for the resulting human rights abuses,” said EFF Civil Liberties Director David Greene.</p>



DarkMatter assigned her the codename of “Purple Sword,” the lawsuit says, citing a 2019 investigation by Reuters that first detailed the hacking of al-Hathloul.

The lawsuit is the latest legal challenge to the secretive private cyber-surveillance industry, which often sells pricey hacking services to authoritarian governments that are used to secretly break into phones and other devices of activists, journalists, political opponents and others. Tech giant Apple [filed a lawsuit last month against Israel’s NSO Group](#) seeking to block the world’s most infamous hacker-for-hire company from [breaking into Apple’s products](#), like the iPhone.

Baier, Adams and Gericke [admitted in September to providing sophisticated computer hacking technology](#) to the UAE and agreed to pay nearly \$1.7 million to resolve criminal charges in a deferred prosecution agreement the Justice Department described as the first of its kind. The Justice Department described each of them as former U.S. intelligence or military personnel. Baier previously worked at the National Security Agency, the AP previously reported.

The trio are part of a trend of U.S. officials with backgrounds in spying and hacking going to work for foreign governments with questionable human rights records, which has led to calls in Congress for greater oversight.

Attorneys for Baier, Adams and Gericke did not immediately return requests for comment. Questions sent by email to officials at Abu Dhabi-based DarkMatter could not be delivered.

Arrested in 2018, al-Hathloul was sentenced to almost six years in prison last year under a broad counterterrorism law. Held for 1001 days, with time in pre-trial detention and solitary confinement, she was accused of crimes such as agitating for change, using the internet to cause disorder and pursuing a foreign agenda.

From behind bars, al-Hathloul went on hunger strikes to protest her prison conditions and joined other female activists in testifying to judges that she was tortured and sexually assaulted by masked men during interrogations. The women reported that they were caned, electrocuted and waterboarded. Some said they were groped and threatened with rape. Saudi Arabia denies that any were mistreated.

Her case sparked an international uproar over the Saudi kingdom’s human rights record and President Joe Biden called her a “powerful activist for women’s rights” when she was released in February.

Since details of DarkMatter’s hacking campaign have become public, the company’s profile has dropped over the last few years, with some staff moving on to a new Abu Dhabi-based firm called G42. That firm has been linked to a mobile app suspected of being a spying tool as well as to Chinese coronavirus tests that American officials warned against using over concerns about patient privacy, test accuracy and Chinese government involvement.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Another record year for vulnerabilities</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/nvd-its-another-record-year-for/">https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/nvd-its-another-record-year-for/</a>
GIST	<p>The US-CERT has recorded more vulnerabilities so far in 2021 than any year previously, the fifth year in a row this has happened.</p> <p>At the time of writing, 18,376 vulnerabilities in production code were recorded in the US <a href="#">National Vulnerability Database (NVD)</a>, exceeding the 2020 record of 18,351.</p> <p>However, there were fewer high severity bugs in the NVD than last year. In 2020 the figure reached an all-time-high of 4381, falling to 3630 so far in 2021.</p>



Pravin Madhani, CEO of [K2 Cyber Security](#), argued that this could be due to improved coding practices and the growing popularity of DevSecOps. However, while organizations are coding better, they're not testing as thoroughly as they should, allowing bugs to slip through into production, he added.

"The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has continued to push many organizations to rush getting their applications to production, as part of their digital transformation and cloud journeys," Madhani said.

"This means the code may have been through fewer QA cycles, and there may have been more use of third party, legacy, and open source code, another risk factor for more vulnerabilities."

Casey Ellis, CTO at [Bugcrowd](#), argued that the record number of software flaws this year is a reflection of the pace of technological development.

"It's a probability game, and the more software that is produced, the more vulnerabilities will exist," he added.

Yaniv Bar-Dayana, CEO at [Vulcan Cyber](#), claimed that more concerning than this year's NVD list is the "security debt" that continues to pile up year after year.

"If IT security teams are leaving 2020's vulnerabilities unaddressed, the real 2021 number is cumulative and becoming harder and harder to defend against," he argued.

"Cybersecurity teams need to do more than just scan for vulnerabilities. We need to work together as an industry to better measure, manage and mitigate cyber risk, or we will be crushed by this growing mountain of vulnerability debt."

The news comes [after bug bounty platform HackerOne revealed](#) its researchers found 66,000 valid vulnerabilities this year, a 20% increase on the 2020 figure.

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HEADLINE	12/10 Massive attack on 1.6M WordPress sites
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/massive-attack-against-16-million-wordpress-sites-underway/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/massive-attack-against-16-million-wordpress-sites-underway/</a>
GIST	<p>Wordfence analysts report having detected a massive wave of attacks in the last couple of days, originating from 16,000 IPs and targeting over 1.6 million WordPress sites.</p> <p>The threat actors target four WordPress plugins and fifteen Epsilon Framework themes, one of which has no available patch.</p> <p>Some of the targeted plugins were patched all the way back in 2018, while others had their vulnerabilities addressed as recently as this week.</p> <p>The affected plugins and their versions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• PublishPress Capabilities</li><li>• Kiwi Social Plugin</li><li>• Pinterest Automatic</li><li>• WordPress Automatic</li></ul> <p>The targeted Epsilon Framework themes are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shapely</li><li>• NewsMag</li><li>• Activello</li><li>• Ildy</li><li>• Allegiant</li><li>• Newspaper X</li></ul>

- Pixova Lite
- Brilliance
- MedZone Lite
- Regina Lite
- Transcend
- Affluent
- Bonkers
- Antreas
- NatureMag Lite – No patch available

"In most cases, the attackers are updating the users\_can\_register option to enabled and setting the default\_role option to *administrator*," [Wordfence](#) explains.

"This makes it possible for attackers to register on any site as an administrator effectively taking over the site."

### **Check, update, clean**

To check if your site has already been compromised, you can review all user accounts and look for any rogue additions that should be removed immediately.

Next, review the site's settings at "[http://examplesite\[.\]com/wp-admin/options-general.php](http://examplesite[.]com/wp-admin/options-general.php)" and pay attention to the Membership and the new user default role setting.

### **Checking settings on the site**

It is recommended to update your plugins and themes as soon as possible, even if they're not in the above list. If you're using NatureMag Lite, for which there's no fix, you should uninstall it immediately.

Note that updating the plugins won't eliminate the threat if your site has already been compromised. In this case, you are advised to follow the instructions found in [detailed clean-up guides](#) first.

In general, try to keep the number of plugins at your WordPress site to the absolute minimum necessary as this dramatically reduces the chances of being targeted and hacked in the first place.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Cox Communications discloses data breach</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/cox-discloses-data-breach-after-hacker-impersonates-support-agent/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/cox-discloses-data-breach-after-hacker-impersonates-support-agent/</a>
GIST	<p>Cox Communications has disclosed a data breach after a hacker impersonated a support agent to gain access to customers' personal information.</p> <p>Cox Communications, aka Cox Cable, is a digital cable provider and telecommunication company that provides internet, television, and phone services in the USA.</p> <p>This week, customers began receiving letters in the mail disclosing that Cox Communications learned on October 11th, 2021, that "unknown person(s)" impersonated a Cox support agent to access customer information.</p> <p>There are not a lot of details about the security incident, but the hacker likely used a social engineering attack to gain access to Cox internal systems that provided information about customers.</p> <p>"On October 11, 2021, Cox learned that an unknown person(s) had impersonated a Cox agent and gained access to a small number of customer accounts. We immediately launched an internal investigation, took steps to secure the affected customer accounts, and notified law enforcement of the incident," reads the data breach notification signed from Amber Hall, Chief Compliance and Privacy Officer of Cox Communications.</p>

"After further investigation, we discover that the unknown person(s) may have viewed certain types of information that are maintained in your Cox customer account, including your name, address, telephone number, Cox account number, Cox.net email address, username, PIN code, account security question and answer, and/or the types of services that you receive from Cox."

In summary, the data breach exposed the following sensitive information for affected customers:

- Name
- Address
- Telephone number
- Cox account number
- Cox.net email address
- Username
- PIN code
- Account security questions and answers
- and/or the services customers receive from Cox.

While Cox does not state that financial information or passwords were accessed, they are advising affected customers to monitor their financial accounts and to change passwords on other accounts using the same one as the Cox customer account.

Cox is offering affected customers a free one-year Experian IdentityWorks that can be used to monitor credit reports and detect signs of fraudulent activity.

In a statement to BleepingComputer, Cox said that they have reported the incident to law enforcement and that it only affected a small number of customers.

When we asked further questions regarding the number of affected customers and how the breach took place, we did not receive a response.

Media conglomerate [Cox Media Group suffered a ransomware attack](#) in June 2021 that took down live TV and radio broadcast streams. The ransomware attack and this incident do not appear to be related.

#### **What should Cox Communications customers do?**

If you are affected by this data breach or are simply concerned about the safety of your Cox account, you should perform the following steps:

- Immediately change the password and account security questions/answers on your Cox account.
- Be on the lookout for phishing emails pretending to be from Cox that are designed to steal your login credentials.
- Enable 2-factor authentication for your Cox accounts to make it harder for threat actors to log in to your account.

Once again, while Cox did not disclose that financial information was accessed by the threat actor, due to the amount of data exposed, all affected customers should monitor their credit reports for unusual activity.

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HEADLINE	12/09 ALPHV BlackCat: complex ransomware
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/alphv-blackcat-this-years-most-sophisticated-ransomware/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/alphv-blackcat-this-years-most-sophisticated-ransomware/</a>
GIST	<p>The new ALPHV ransomware operation, aka BlackCat, launched last month and could be the most sophisticated ransomware of the year, with a highly-customizable feature set allowing for attacks on a wide range of corporate environments.</p> <p>The ransomware executable is written in Rust, which is not typical for malware developers but is slowly increasing in popularity due to its high performance and memory safety.</p>

MalwareHunterTeam found the new ransomware and told BleepingComputer that the first ID Ransomware submission for the new operation was on November 21st.

The ransomware is named by the developers as ALPHV and is being promoted on Russian-speaking hacking forums.

MalwareHunterTeam named the ransomware BlackCat due to the same favicon of a black cat being used on every victim's Tor payment site, while the data leak site uses a bloody dagger...

### **Favicons used on Tor payment and data leak sites**

Like all ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS) operations, the ALPHV BlackCat operators recruit affiliates to perform corporate breaches and encrypt devices.

In return, affiliates will earn varying revenue shares based on the size of a ransom payment. For example, for ransom payments up to \$1.5 million, the affiliate earns 80%, 85% for up to \$3 million, and 90% of payments over \$3 million.

To illustrate the type of money an affiliate can earn from these RaaS programs, [CNA reportedly paid a \\$40 million ransom](#) to the Russian hacking group Evil Corp. Under ALPHV's revenue share, this would equate to \$36 million paid to the affiliate.

### **Exploring the features of the ALPHV BlackCat ransomware**

The ALPHV BlackCat ransomware includes numerous advanced features that let it stand out from other ransomware operations. In this section, we will take a look at the ransomware and how it operates, and demonstrate a test encryption from a sample shared with BleepingComputer.

The ransomware is entirely command-line driven, human-operated, and highly configurable, with the ability to use different encryption routines, spread between computers, kill virtual machines and ESXi VMs, and automatically wipe ESXi snapshots to prevent recovery.

Each ALPHV ransomware executable includes a [JSON configuration](#) that allows customization of extensions, ransom notes, how data will be encrypted, excluded folders/files/extensions, and the services and processes to be automatically terminated.

According to the threat actor, the ransomware can be configured to use four different encryption modes, as described in their "recruitment" post on a dark web hacking forum.

In auto mode, the software detects the presence of AES hardware support (exists in all modern processors) and uses it. If there is no AES support, the software encrypts files ChaCha20.

ALPHV BlackCat can also be configured with domain credentials that can be used to spread the ransomware and encrypt other devices on the network. The executable will then extract PSEXEC to the %Temp% folder and use it to copy the ransomware to other devices on the network and execute it to encrypt the remote Windows machine.

When launching the ransomware, the affiliate can use a console-based user interface that allows them to monitor the progression of the attack. In the image below, you can see this interface displayed while BleepingComputer encrypted a test device using a modified executable to append the .bleepin extension.

In the sample tested by BleepingComputer, the ransomware will terminate processes and Windows services that could prevent files from being encrypted. These terminated processes include Veeam, backup software, database servers, Microsoft Exchange, Office applications, mail clients, and the Steam process not to leave gamers out.

Other actions taken during this "setup" process include the clearing of Recycle Bin, deleting Shadow Volume Copies, scanning for other network devices, and connecting to a Microsoft cluster if one exists.

ALPHV BlackCat also uses the [Windows Restart Manager](#) API to close processes or shut down Windows services keeping a file open during encryption.

Usually, when encrypting a device, the ransomware will use a random name extension, which is appended to all files and included in the ransom note. Ransom notes are named in the format '**RECOVER-[extension]-FILES.txt**'...

Ransom notes are preconfigured by the affiliate performing the attack and are different for each victim. Some ransom notes include the types of data stolen and a link to a Tor data leak site where the victims can preview stolen data.

Each victim also has a unique Tor site and sometimes a unique data leak site, allowing the affiliate to conduct their own negotiations.

Finally, BlackCat claims to be cross-platform with support for multiple operating systems.

Operating systems that the threat actors allegedly tested their ransomware on are included below:

- All line of Windows from 7 and higher (tested on 7, 8.1, 10, 11; 2008r2, 2012, 2016, 2019, 2022); XP and 2003 can be encrypted over SMB.
- ESXI (tested on 5.5, 6.5, 7.0.2u)
- Debian (tested on 7, 8, 9);
- Ubuntu (tested on 18.04, 20.04)
- ReadyNAS, Synology

Ransomware expert and ID Ransomware creator Michael Gillespie has analyzed the encryption routine used by the ransomware and, unfortunately, was not able to find any weaknesses that could allow free decryption.

#### **Access-token feature makes negotiations secret**

A long-standing problem affecting both victims and ransomware operations is that samples commonly get leaked through malware analysis sites, allowing full access to the negotiation chat between a ransomware gang and their victim.

In some cases, this has led to unrelated parties commenting in the chat and disrupting negotiations.

To prevent this from happening, the ALPHV BlackCat ransomware developers introduced an --access-token=[access\_token] command-line argument that must be used when launching the encryptor.

This access token is used to create the access key needed to enter a negotiation chat on the ransomware gang's Tor payment site. As this token is not included in the malware sample, even if it is uploaded to a malware analysis site, researchers will not use it to access a negotiation site without the ransom note from the actual attack.

#### **Ransoms range from \$400k to millions of dollars**

BleepingComputer is aware of multiple victims targeted by this ransomware since November from numerous countries, including the USA, Australia, and India.

Ransom demands range between \$400,000 to \$3 million payable in Bitcoin or Monero. However, if victims pay in bitcoin there is an additional 15% fee added to the ransom.

However, as Monero is considered a privacy coin and frowned upon by the US government, it is not as easily accessible to victims.

	<p>Unlike other ransomware operations who have been <a href="#">threatening to wipe or publish data if negotiation firms are hired</a>, ALPHV is catering to ransomware negotiators with a "Intermediary" login page to conduct private negotiations.</p> <p>Like other newer ransomware gangs, ALPHV uses a triple-extortion tactic where they steal data before encrypting devices and threat to publish the data if a ransom is not paid. BleepingComputer has seen multiple data leaks sites for this operation where screenshots of data have been published.</p> <p>As an additional extortion method, the threat actors threaten to DDoS victims until they pay a ransom. Overall, this is a highly sophisticated ransomware with the threat actors clearly considering all aspects of attacks.</p> <p>With the <a href="#">BlackMatter</a> and REvil ransomware operations <a href="#">shutting down under pressure from law enforcement</a>, it has left a large void waiting for another threat actor to fill.</p> <p>It is very likely that ALPHV BlackCat is the one that has a good chance of filling it.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Phishing pages: 1/3<sup>rd</sup> less than a day active</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.darkreading.com/endpoint/one-third-of-phishing-pages-active-less-than-a-day">https://www.darkreading.com/endpoint/one-third-of-phishing-pages-active-less-than-a-day</a>
GIST	<p>One-third of phishing pages are active less than a day, according to a new analysis that finds the first hours a phishing page is online are the most dangerous for users.</p> <p>In their investigation on the life cycle of phishing pages, Kaspersky researchers analyzed 5,307 examples of pages from July 19 through Aug. 2, 2021. Of these, 1,784 were inactive after the first day of monitoring, and several ceased to exist in the first hours. One-quarter were inactive within 13 hours of monitoring, and half lasted less than 94 hours, their research discovered.</p> <p>The life cycle of a phishing page depends on when it becomes visible to site admins who can then remove it. Even if cybercriminals deploy their own server on a domain they purchased, the registrars might remove the phishers' right to host data on it if they suspect fraudulent activity.</p> <p>A phishing page is added to more anti-phishing databases the longer it's active, meaning it will lure fewer visitors over time. Given the pages' short life cycle, the criminals behind them want to distribute links to them as soon as they're active to ensure broader reach. Often they will choose to create a new page instead of altering an existing one; further, they may change the page during its life cycle so they aren't blocked.</p> <p>This information is useful not only for updating databases, but for incident response, says Egor Bubnov, security researcher at Kaspersky, in a statement. If a business is hit with a spam campaign containing fraudulent links, it will know to fight it the campaign in the first few hours because that is the most beneficial time for criminals' activity. And when people receive a link they're unsure of, they'll know to wait a few hours — during which time, the page may cease to exist.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	<i>Read more details <a href="#">here</a>.</i>

HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Emotet back, more dangerous than before</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.darkreading.com/threat-intelligence/emotet-is-back-and-it-s-more-dangerous-than-before">https://www.darkreading.com/threat-intelligence/emotet-is-back-and-it-s-more-dangerous-than-before</a>
GIST	<p>Like Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator, the dreaded Emotet malware is back infecting computers worldwide and once again putting organizations at heightened risk of subsequent ransomware attacks.</p> <p>Researchers from Check Point this week reported recently observing Emotet samples being dropped on systems that previously had been infected with banking-Trojan-turned-malware-downloader Trickbot. The new Emotet malware began surfacing on Nov. 15, or about 10 months after law enforcement authorities took its infrastructure down in a <a href="#">coordinated effort</a> that spanned multiple countries.</p>



Since Nov. 15, the volume of Emotet malware that Check Point has spotted has continued to grow daily and is now at least 50% of the volume before the January 2021 takedown. The malware is spreading both via Trickbot and via malicious spam messages that are being sent from infected systems to other computers worldwide. The spam emails attempt to get users to download a password-protected zip file containing malicious documents that, when opened, results in the computer getting infected with Emotet.

### **Troubling Development**

The malware's reemergence is troublesome for enterprises because of how extensively it was tied to ransomware attacks before the January takedown. Emotet is designed to harvest email addresses, steal credentials, distribute spam, enable lateral movement, download other malware — including Trickbot — and for other malicious activities.

The business model of its operators, before being forced offline in January, was to infect networks and to later sell access to that network to other threat actors — most notably ransomware operators, says Lotem Finkelstein, head of threat intelligence at Check Point.

"[Between] 2018 and 2020, Emotet facilitated the success of ransomware, and its return in late 2021 is a warning sign for 2022," Finkelstein says. "Emotet infection, or even an infection attempt, is the best early [indicator of] future ransomware infections," he says.

In the months the malware was dormant, the authors of Emotet have tweaked its features and made it more capable. One example is the new variant's use of elliptic curve cryptography (ECC) instead of the weaker RSA cryptography in the previous version, for encrypted communications. Emotet's authors also have added a new tweak to the initial infection vector in the form of malicious Windows app installer packages that imitate legitimate software, Check Point said in its report.

Check Point is the latest security vendor to sound the alarm on Emotet's return. Last month, [Deep Instinct](#) reported on the reemergence of the malware and analyzed some of its updates, including new tricks for downloading on a system and for evasion.

This week, Intel 471 [updated](#) a blog post from last month explaining how the latest Emotet variant is different from its predecessor. The threat intelligence firm discovered that many parts of the new Emotet are identical to the malware in January, but some are different. For instance, the old version used an RSA key to encrypt the key used to encrypt all malware traffic. The new version uses ECC.

In addition, Emotet's authors have made some changes to the communication protocol, introduced a new process checking module, and made some tweaks to its obfuscation mechanisms, Intel 471 said. Significantly, the company discovered the new Emotet is being distributed via two distinct botnets currently being tracked as Epoch4 and Epoch5.

Meanwhile, [Cryptolaemus](#), an independent group of security researchers that has been tracking the Emotet threat, said they had observed the malware now being used to drop post-exploit Cobalt Strike Beacons on infected systems.

### **Same Threat Actor Likely Behind New Variant**

Finkelstein says there's nothing to suggest a new player is behind the latest variant. "We believe it is the same actor; at least, some of the criminal minds behind the old Emotet are also involved with the new Emotet," he notes. "Whoever is responsible for the revamped Emotet knows much about the faults of the old version, and acts to improve it."

In resurfacing, Emotet has become the latest example of the resilience that some cyber operators have shown against even the most concerted takedown efforts. At the time of its takedown in January, the Emotet botnet was made up of some 1.6 million systems that were being used for a variety of malicious purposes, including malware and spam distribution and data harvesting. Some 45,000 of the infected hosts were in the US. The command-and-control infrastructure for managing the botnet included hundreds of servers scattered around the world.



As part of the takedown operation, law enforcement agencies from the US, Canada, the UK, the Netherlands, France, and other countries took control of Emotet servers in their respective jurisdictions. They then installed software that neutralized the ability for the malware operators to control infected systems. In some cases, law enforcement deployed software for getting rid of Emotet from infected systems.

The fact that the malware is back speaks to the globalized nature of the Emotet operation, which US authorities have estimated has already caused several hundreds of millions of dollars in damages.

"Because they are a distributed global organization, it requires perfect [synchronization]" to shut the operation down completely, Finkelstein says. Also, the need to apprehend the masterminds behind the operation is key, he says.

Emotet's reappearance is also a testament to the success of the collaboration its operators have with the actors behind Trickbot — a highly modular malware family that started off in 2016 as a banking Trojan but is now widely used to distribute malware. Law enforcement authorities attempted to [disrupt the Trickbot operation](#) in a major initiative in October 2020, but it continues to operate like before. Trickbot was the most prevalent malware in May, June, and October this year, and the malware has infected over 140,000 systems worldwide in the last 11 months, Check Point found.

As with Emotet's operators, the threat actor behind Trickbot, too, has been associated with various ransomware campaigns, including Ruyk and Conti. In 2020, Trickbot, along with Emotet, was used to deliver Ryuk ransomware in a campaign that caused massive damage.

"Emotet and Trickbot have always been working together," Finkelstein says. "They opened the door to each other, and basically made a business out of their collaboration." So, he adds, it's no surprise that Trickbot has facilitated an Emotet revival.

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HEADLINE	12/09 Half of websites still use legacy crypto keys
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/half-of-websites-still-using/?&amp;web_view=true">https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/half-of-websites-still-using/?&amp;web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>The internet is becoming more secure overall, but slightly more than half of websites' digital keys are still generated via legacy encryption algorithms, according to new research.</p> <p>Security firm <a href="#">Venafi</a> enlisted the help of noted researcher Scott Helme to analyze the world's top one million sites over the past 18 months.</p> <p>The resulting <a href="#">TLS Crawler Report</a> revealed some progress in a few areas.</p> <p>Nearly three-quarters (72%) of sites now actively redirect traffic to use HTTPS, an increase of 15% since March 2020. Even better, more than half of the sites studied that use HTTPS are on the latest version of TLS: TLSv1.3. It has now overtaken TLSv1.2 to become the most popular protocol version.</p> <p>In addition, almost one in five of the top one million sites now use the more secure HSTS (HTTP Strict Transport Security) — a 44% increase since March 2020.</p> <p>Better still, the number of top one million sites using EV certificates is at its lowest point ever in the last six years of analysis. These are noted for slow, manual approval processes which drive too much friction for end users.</p> <p>Conversely, the much more user-friendly Let's Encrypt is now the leading Certificate Authority for TLS certificates, with 28% of sites using it.</p>

However, there is also some work to be done. The report found that nearly 51% of sites still use legacy RSA encryption algorithms to generate authentication keys.

Alongside TLS, these form the “machine identities” which help to validate and secure connections between physical, virtual and IoT devices, APIs, applications and clusters.

RSA is significantly less secure than modern alternative ECDSA, a public key cryptography encryption algorithm which boasts greater computational complexity and smaller authorization keys. The latter means they require less bandwidth to set up an SSL/TLS connection, making them ideal for mobile apps and support for IoT and embedded devices, according to Venafi.

Helme branded the RSA findings "a shame and somewhat surprising."

"I would have expected that the rise in adoption of TLSv1.3 usage would have driving the ECDSA numbers up much more. One of the main reasons to keep RSA around for authentication is legacy clients that don't support ECDSA yet, but that seems at odds with the huge rise in TLSv1.3 which isn't supported by legacy clients. We also continue to see use of RSA 3072 and RSA 4096 in numbers that are concerning," explained Helme.

“If you're using larger RSA keys for security reasons then you should absolutely be on ECDSA already which is a stronger key algorithm and offers better performance. My gut feeling here is that there's a lot of legacy stuff out there or site operators just haven't realized the advantages of switching over to ECDSA.”

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HEADLINE	12/09 Food importer Atalanta admits data breach
SOURCE	<a href="https://portswigger.net/daily-swig/us-food-importer-atalanta-admits-ransomware-attack?&amp;web_view=true">https://portswigger.net/daily-swig/us-food-importer-atalanta-admits-ransomware-attack?&amp;web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>North American food importer Atalanta has admitted that it suffered a data breach involving employees' personal information as the result of a <a href="#">ransomware</a> attack.</p> <p>In a <a href="#">statement</a> issued on Wednesday (December 8), Atalanta outlined its incident response since the late July <a href="#">attack</a>.</p> <p>On July 25, 2021, Atalanta detected malicious activity on its network including the encryption of certain systems. Upon becoming aware of the malicious activity, Atalanta engaged third-party specialists and immediately began to remediate the situation, including conducting a forensic investigation into the incident.</p> <p>The forensic investigation concluded that certain information related to Atalanta's current and former employees as well as certain visitors was accessed and acquired as result of this incident. There is no indication to date of any misuse of the information involved.</p> <p>Atalanta (not to be confused with the Italian football club of the same name) went on to say that it “moved quickly to investigate and identify the individuals whose information was potentially involved, and to implement additional security measures to further safeguard its systems and practices”.</p> <p>The company, North America's largest privately held specialty food importer, also offered general advice on resources that can help individuals guard against identity theft in cases where their private information has been exposed.</p> <p><b>Pertinent questions</b></p> <p>Atalanta's statement leaves several pertinent questions unanswered, including around how many records were exposed and what personal information they contained.</p> <p>Questions about how the attack happened in the first place and which strain of ransomware was involved in the attack also come to mind.</p>

*The Daily Swig* put these questions to Atalanta. We'll update our story as and when more information comes to hand.

Ransomware attacks against enterprises are increasingly common, a trend driven by the easy profits they offer cybercriminals, even if only a minority of victims actually pay up for decryption keys.

As [recently reported](#) by *The Daily Swig*, ransomware gangs are increasingly threatening to release samples of stolen data through data leak sites if marks resist their extortionate demands for payment.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Australia police: Anom backdoor arrests</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.vice.com/en/article/k7wbqv/anom-backdoor-fbi-years-of-arrests">https://www.vice.com/en/article/k7wbqv/anom-backdoor-fbi-years-of-arrests</a>
GIST	<p>Arrests from the fallout of Anom, an encrypted chat platform that authorities secretly backdoored, will continue for “years,” according to the Australian Federal Police (AFP).</p> <p><a href="#">The announcement came</a> as the AFP said it was entering the second phase of Anom-related arrests. The AFP said this phase has identified up to 160 targets.</p> <p>“It is just a matter of time before we scoop up those who believed they had gotten away with their crimes—like the alleged criminals who smashed or burned their ANOM devices,” AFP Assistant Commissioner Crime Command Nigel Ryan said in the announcement.</p> <p>Destroying an Anom device likely wouldn’t help a suspected criminal user because authorities will already have a copy of each users’ messages. In 2018, a former distributor for another encrypted phone company called Phantom Secure was developing Anom as a next-generation encrypted device. <a href="#">They offered Anom to the FBI for use in current and future investigations</a>. The informant, the FBI, and the Australian police then added a master key that could be used to decrypt messages sent by all of Anom’s users essentially in real-time. Later, Anom had 11,800 devices in countries all over the world.</p> <p>The FBI dubbed this Operation Trojan Shield; the Australian focused part is called Operation Ironside. To date, Australian authorities have charged over 300 people and executed 700 warrants, the announcement adds. Globally, nearly 1,000 people were arrested.</p> <p>The collected Anom messages gave a rare window into the intimate details of organized crime. Groups used diving teams to attach or retrieve drugs from cargo ships, using underwater scooters to move around more quickly. Some syndicates used waste management services to pick up drugs hidden in bins at ports, and specialist cooks of illicit drugs provided their services to help extract concealed drugs, according to the announcement.</p> <p>The AFP also provided some information on how it said Anom operated. It said Anom wholesalers were mid to high level criminals, with rights to distribute the devices in certain countries, and that drivers were hired to deliver the devices themselves.</p> <p><a href="#">Using internal documents and videos from inside Anom</a>, Motherboard has shown that the company operated as an entity in its own right, including systems for tracking how many phones distributors had in different parts of the world; customer support; and a workflow for flashing devices with Anom’s customized software.</p> <p>The AFP announcement added that “Criminals have moved to other encrypted devices. It is likely some large syndicates will develop their own dedicated encrypted communication devices and private networks within the next three years.”</p> <p>As <a href="#">Motherboard reported in 2019</a>, an organized crime group run by two kingpins known as The Brothers created its own encrypted phone company called MPC. MPC was <a href="#">linked to the assassination of crime blogger Martin Kok</a>.</p>

## Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	12/10 Suspected Islamists kill 16 eastern Congo
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/suspected-islamists-kill-16-people-eastern-congo-2021-12-10/">https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/suspected-islamists-kill-16-people-eastern-congo-2021-12-10/</a>
GIST	<p>BENI, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dec 10 (Reuters) - Suspected Islamist militants killed 16 people this week in two rural towns in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, a local official, a civil society leader and a resident said on Friday.</p> <p>They said the attackers belonged to <a href="#">the Allied Democratic Forces</a> (ADF), a militia linked to Islamic State that is accused of killing hundreds of civilians in eastern Congo since 2019 and carrying out a string of recent bombings in Uganda.</p> <p>The attack took place on Wednesday night in the rural commune of Mangina and nearby Masiriko in Congo's North Kivu province, the sources said. An unknown number of people were also kidnapped, said Freddy Mbayayi, deputy mayor of Mangina.</p> <p>"It was horrible to see mothers, children and elderly people fleeing the cruelty of the ADF," said Pelka Josaphat, a resident of Mangina.</p> <p>"The victims were killed by machetes and within my family four people are not responding to calls because they were carried away by the enemy," he told Reuters.</p> <p>Congo and Uganda last month launched joint military operations against the ADF, with Uganda mounting air and artillery strikes against their bases and sending thousands of troops across the border.</p> <p>Uganda has vowed to stay as long as necessary to defeat the militia, but the intervention has alarmed some Congolese, who recall Uganda's plundering of their resources during the 1998-2003 conflict.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/09 Warrantless surveillance abroad upheld
SOURCE	<a href="https://lawandcrime.com/civil-rights/federal-appeals-court-upholds-conviction-based-on-evidence-derived-from-warrantless-surveillance/">https://lawandcrime.com/civil-rights/federal-appeals-court-upholds-conviction-based-on-evidence-derived-from-warrantless-surveillance/</a>
GIST	<p>A sharply divided panel of three federal appeals court judges has upheld a conviction of a legal permanent U.S. resident that relied on information gathered from warrantless surveillance of a non-citizen living abroad.</p> <p>In a 163-page ruling issued Wednesday, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit Judges <b>Scott Matheson</b>, a <b>Barack Obama</b> appointee, and <b>Allison Eid</b>, a <b>Donald Trump</b> appointee, found that information collected from warrantless surveillance of non-U.S. citizens living abroad did not violate the constitutional rights of <b>Jamshid Muhtorov</b>, a legal permanent resident of the U.S. and political refugee from Uzbekistan.</p> <p>The judges also found that a nearly six-and-a-half year delay between Muhtorov's arrest and trial did not violate his Sixth Amendment right to a speedy trial.</p> <p>Muhtorov, a political refugee from Uzbekistan and legal permanent resident of the U.S., was convicted in June 2018 of conspiracy to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization.</p> <p>According to prosecutors, he had pledged loyalty to the Islamic Jihad Union and had planned to travel to Turkey to join the organization. When he was arrested at a Chicago airport in December 2011,</p>

investigators found incriminating videos on his phone, including instructions on how to make explosive devices and, according to the court, “graphic images of jihadists beheading captured men,” and nearly \$3,000 in cash.

Muhtorov appealed his conviction, arguing that evidence collected and used against him was, essentially, fruit from the poisonous tree of the warrantless surveillance of a non-U.S. citizen pursuant to Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Amendments Act of 2008. Muhtorov’s communication with that non-citizen formed the basis for a warrant under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), and evidence collected under that warrant was used to convict him.

Muhtorov argued that the Section 702 surveillance violated the Fourth Amendment, and that Section 702 itself violates the Constitution. He also argued that he should have been given access to classified information that supported the government’s surveillance under Section 702 and FISA, and that the government should have disclosed its surveillance techniques. Muhtorov also argued on appeal that his Sixth Amendment right to a speedy trial was violated because more than six years passed between his arrest in January 2012 and his conviction in June 2018, during which time he was incarcerated.

Two of the three judges on the panel rejected all of Muhtorov’s arguments, finding that that the Section 702 surveillance was lawful, and that Muhtorov’s trial was not unreasonably delayed.

In finding that the Section 702 surveillance didn’t violate Muhtorov’s Fourth Amendment rights, the majority essentially accepted the government’s version of events that “the evidence Muhtorov sought to suppress was not obtained or derived from any queries associated with him.”

The court also rejected Muhtorov’s argument that Section 702 violates Article III of the Constitution and the separation of powers.

“Under Section 702, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (“FISC”) does not issue individualized warrants,” the majority wrote. “Instead, it approves procedures in advance under which the government conducts warrantless foreign intelligence surveillance. Although the FISC’s role under Section 702 is novel, it comports with Article III and the separation of powers.”

As to the six-plus years between Muhtorov’s arrest and trial, the majority said that although the delay was “concerning,” the “quantity and nature of the discovery, and the overall good faith and diligence of the government and the district court in bringing this case to trial” countered any potential Sixth Amendment violation.

Senior U.S. Circuit Court Judge **Carlos Lucero**, a **Bill Clinton** appointee, strongly disagreed with the majority.

Lucero called the ruling an “extreme departure” from “accepted norms of constitutional and procedural law affecting this case.” Much of the dissent focused on the six years and four months that elapsed between Muhtorov’s arrest and trial, with Lucero concluding that it did not meet the constitutional requirements for a speedy trial.

“The right to a speedy trial does not allow the government to sit on its hands for 46 months before it begins to perform its duties,” Lucero wrote in a 48-page dissent. “That Muhtorov languished in jail under an unresolved charge while the government actively avoided its constitutional duties is anathema to the Sixth Amendment speedy trial guarantee.”

Lucero writes that he would have vacated the conviction on speedy trial grounds.

Lucero also said he had “serious concerns” about his fellow judges’ analysis of the Fourth Amendment and Article III issues, and says the majority opinion “avoid[s] difficult constitutional questions by accepting as true unsupported factual assertions that the government makes in its brief on appeal.”

The majority opinion addressed Lucero's concerns in a footnote, insisting that it "conducted a careful and thorough de novo review of the classified and public records and disagree with the dissent's unfounded assertions."

The American Civil Liberties Union, which represented Muhtorov, said the decision was wrong, and it "endangers Americans' protections" against government surveillance.

"We don't give up bedrock Fourth Amendment protections when we communicate with family, friends, and colleagues abroad, contrary to the court's ruling today," **Patrick Toomey**, senior staff attorney with the ACLU's National Security Project, said Wednesday in a statement. "Under Section 702, the government for years has amassed our online messages, chats, and emails without a warrant, violating the constitutional rights of countless Americans, including Mr. Muhtorov. Mass surveillance threatens all of us. The FBI and NSA don't have a free pass to seize and sift through our most sensitive communications, and we will keep fighting to ensure they can't violate the Constitution."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 UK: record number children in terror arrests</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/09/record-number-of-uk-children-arrested-for-terror-offences">https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/09/record-number-of-uk-children-arrested-for-terror-offences</a>
GIST	<p>A record number of children were arrested on suspicion of terror offences in Great Britain in the last year, a development that investigators have linked to the shutdown of schools during the early stages of the pandemic.</p> <p>Figures released by the Home Office show there were 25 such arrests of under-18s in the 12 months to September, the majority in relation to far-right ideology.</p> <p>This was an increase from 17 arrests the previous year. Under-18s accounted for 13% of all terror arrests last year, up from 8%.</p> <p>"We are very concerned that children are becoming an increasing proportion of our arrests," said the deputy assistant commissioner Dean Haydon, the senior national coordinator for counter-terrorism policing.</p> <p>In February a 13-year-old neo-Nazi from Cornwall was found guilty of possessing bomb-making manuals and disseminating far-right materials online.</p> <p>Last week a 17-year-old from Derbyshire appeared before Westminster magistrates charged with possessing and sharing a terrorist publication. A trial is expected next year.</p> <p>Investigators highlighted the impact of pandemic-related school closures, arguing that educational settings help normalise behaviour, while schools regularly report cases of concern to Prevent, the government's deradicalisation programme.</p> <p>Loneliness during lockdowns and the ease with which young people with time on their hands can seek out extremist material online when not being supervised are also factors driving the rise in numbers, police believe. Some extremists are using Covid conspiracy theories and online gaming channels as a means of recruitment.</p> <p>At the same time, restrictions on socialising and movement helped push down the number of adult terrorism arrests by 13%, reflecting wider lockdown-related falls in crime.</p> <p>Officers said they wanted parents to be more aware of the risks and to be prepared to call in Prevent, which few currently do.</p> <p>"Our research tells us that parents, family members and friends are the first to see the changes in behaviour which might indicate that a loved one is being radicalised," Haydon said. "But currently just 3% of people</p>



	<p>we help through Prevent come to the programme because of concerns raised by those same people who know them best.”</p> <p>He advised parents to seek advice from the Act Early scheme.</p> <p>Counter-terrorism police said they had stopped 32 “late-stage” plots in the four years from 2017, an increase of one since September and four since March. Those uncovered by police and MI5 since March include three far-right plots and one leftwing, anarchist or single-issue plot – while the total of Islamist plots has remained unchanged at 18.</p> <p>There have been two terror attacks this autumn. In October the Conservative MP Sir David Amess was stabbed to death at his constituency surgery in Leigh-on-sea, Essex, in what is believed to have been an Islamist attack. A month later a man blew himself up in a taxi outside Liverpool women’s hospital for reasons investigators are yet to firmly identify.</p> <p>Reflecting the increasing focus on far-right activity, the number of white people arrested as terror suspects is now double the number of arrests of people from an Asian background. The Home Office data said 101 white people were apprehended, up 5%, and 49 people of Asian ethnic appearance, down 40%.</p> <p>Last month figures from Prevent covering 2020-21 showed that 310 people were referred to the programme by schools, colleges and universities because of far-right links, and 157 were referred because of vulnerability to Islamic extremism.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 General: AQ grown slightly in Afghanistan</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/in-afghanistan-the-al-qaida-extremist-group-has-grown-slightly-us-army-general-435653">https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/in-afghanistan-the-al-qaida-extremist-group-has-grown-slightly-us-army-general-435653</a>
GIST	<p>The al-Qaida extremist group has grown slightly inside Afghanistan since US forces left in late August, and the country’s new Taliban leaders are divided over whether to fulfill their 2020 pledge to break ties with the group, the top US commander in the region said Thursday.</p> <p>Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of US Central Command, said in an interview with The Associated Press that the departure of US military and intelligence assets from Afghanistan has made it much harder to track al-Qaida and other extremist groups inside Afghanistan.</p> <p>“We’re probably at about 1 or 2 percent of the capabilities we once had to look into Afghanistan,” he said, adding that this makes it “very hard, not impossible” to ensure that neither al-Qaida nor the Islamic State group’s Afghanistan affiliate can pose a threat to the United States.</p> <p>Speaking at the Pentagon, McKenzie said it’s clear that al-Qaida is attempting to rebuild its presence inside Afghanistan, which was the base from which it planned the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks against the United States. He said some militants are coming into the country through its porous borders, but it is hard for the US to track numbers.</p> <p>The US invasion that followed the September 11 attacks led to a 20-year war that succeeded initially by removing the Taliban from power but ultimately failed. After President Joe Biden announced in April that he was withdrawing completely from Afghanistan, the Taliban systematically overpowered Afghan government defenses and seized Kabul, the capital, in August.</p> <p>McKenzie and other senior US military and national security officials had said before the US withdrawal that it would complicate efforts to keep a lid on the al-Qaida threat, in part because of the loss of on-the-ground intelligence information and the absence of a US-friendly government in Kabul. The US says it will rely on airstrikes from drones and other aircraft based beyond Afghanistan’s borders to respond to any extremist threats against the US homeland.</p>



McKenzie said no such strikes have been conducted since the US completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan on Aug. 30. He added that America's ability to conduct such strikes is based on the availability of intelligence, overhead imagery and other information and communications, "and that architecture is still being developed right now."

Al-Qaida is among numerous extremist groups inside Afghanistan. After 2001, it lost most of its numbers and its ability to directly threaten US territory, but McKenzie said it retains "an aspirational desire" to attack the United States. During their first period of rule in Kabul, from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban gave haven to al-Qaida and refused Washington's demand after 9/11 to expel the group and turn over its leader, Osama bin Laden. The Taliban and al-Qaida have maintained ties ever since.

"So we're still trying to sort out exactly how the Taliban is going to proceed against them, and I think over the month or two it'll become a little more apparent to us," he said.

Similarly, McKenzie said it's not yet clear how strongly Taliban will go after the Islamic State group, also known as ISIS, which has violently attacked the Taliban across the country. The United States blamed ISIS for an Aug. 26 suicide bombing at Kabul airport that killed 13 American service members in the final days of the US evacuation.

ISIS was "reinvigorated," McKenzie said, by the release of numerous ISIS fighters from Afghan prisons in mid-August. He said both ISIS and al-Qaida are recruiting from inside and outside Afghanistan.

"So certainly we should expect a resurgent ISIS. It would be very surprising if that weren't the case," he said, adding, "It remains to be seen that the Taliban are going to be able to take effective action against them."

He called al-Qaida a more difficult problem for the Taliban because of their longstanding ties.

"So I think there are internal arguments inside the Taliban about the way forward," he said. "What we would like to see from the Taliban would be a strong position against al-Qaida," which they promised as part of the February 2020 Doha agreement that committed the United States to fully withdrawing from Afghanistan. "But I don't believe that's yet been fully realized."

McKenzie declined to provide an estimate of the number of al-Qaida operatives inside Afghanistan.

"I think it's probably slightly increased," he said. "There's a presence. We thought it was down pretty small, you know, toward the end of the conflict. I think some people have probably come back in. But it's one of the things we look at, but I wouldn't be confident giving you a number right now."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 UK foils 7 late-stage plots since March 2020</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/u-k-foils-seven-late-stage-plots-since-march-2020/">https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/u-k-foils-seven-late-stage-plots-since-march-2020/</a>
GIST	<p>Counter Terrorism Policing (CTP) and the U.K. Intelligence Services have stopped seven late-stage terror attacks since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading senior police officers to warn the public not to let their guard slip during the festive period.</p> <p>That takes the total number of foiled terrorism plots since March 2017 to 32 – with 18 related to Islamist extremism, 12 to Extreme Right Wing Terrorism and two to Left, Anarchist or Single Issue Terrorism.</p> <p>The warning comes as the Home Office's quarterly release of statistics relating to the police's use of powers under the Terrorism Act 2000 revealed there were a total of 188 arrests for terrorism-related activity in the year ending September 30, 2021.</p>

The Senior National Coordinator for Counter Terrorism Policing, Deputy Assistant Commissioner Dean Haydon, said: “CTP and our colleagues in the security services have stopped seven terror plots in less than two years, assisted by our officers making 188 arrests in the 12 months to the end of September.

“The public will also be well aware of the fact that the U.K. has suffered two terror attacks in quick succession, with the national threat level raising to Severe – meaning an attack is highly likely.

“All of this combines to paint a picture of a sustained and high tempo threat, which our world-class police, security and intelligence services are doing everything in their power to combat.

“But it takes a whole society approach to effectively tackle terrorism, and co-operation between the police and the public is vital, so we need you to be vigilant, and we need you to be alert.

“As we approach the festive period, we need the public to help play their part in protecting the U.K.

“That means trusting your instincts and contacting us if you see anything suspicious – we get 10,000 reports of suspected terrorist activity from the public every year and around 20% of those are useful intelligence which helps officers stop terrorists.

“I would urge everyone to remain vigilant and ACT by reporting it to us confidentially via [gov.uk/ACT](https://gov.uk/ACT) or by calling 0800 789 321. In an emergency, always dial 999.”

CT experts have highlighted one other concerning element to the latest arrest statistics, and that is despite the overall total falling to one of its lowest levels in a decade – with 28 (13%) fewer arrests than the previous 12-month period – children continue to be disproportionately represented.

Despite the overall reduction in arrests, which is largely due to an overall reduction in crime since the beginning of the national lockdown in March last year, 25 children were arrested in relation to terrorism offending – the highest number ever recorded in a 12-month period.

“We are very concerned that children are becoming an increasing proportion of our arrests,” added DAC Haydon.

“But it doesn’t have to be this way. Ideally we would identify when a young person is being led down the path towards terrorism activity and use the Prevent program to try and put them on a different path.

“Our research tells us that parents, family members and friends are the first to see the changes in behavior which might indicate that a loved one is being radicalized. But currently just 3% of people we help through Prevent come to the program because of concerns raised by those same people who know them best.

“We urge concerned parents to visit the website – [www.actearly.uk](https://www.actearly.uk) – designed specifically to offer advice and support for parents and family members who think their loved one might be following a dangerous path towards extremism. Asking for help is a difficult and emotional step, but we must see it for what it is – action which won’t ruin their lives but may well save them.”

The latest Home Office statistics reveal that as in previous years, and similar to other types of crime, the vast majority of those arrested for terrorism-related activity were males (92%). Despite the rise in children being involved in terrorist activity, the ‘30 and over’ age-group again accounted for most arrests (51%).

The arresting officer also records the ethnic appearance of the arrestee. Arrests for those of “White ethnic appearance” increased by 5% (up from 96 to 101 arrests). There was a decrease in the number of arrests of people of “Black ethnic appearance”, from 20 arrests to 7, and a 40% decrease in the number of arrests of people of “Asian ethnic appearance” (from 82 arrests to 49). The number of arrests of people of “Other ethnic appearance” increased by 72% (from 18 arrests to 31).

The proportion of White people arrested exceeded the proportion of Asian people arrested for the fourth consecutive year. Arrests of persons of White ethnic appearance accounted for 54% of arrests, up 10 percentage points on the previous year. Those of Asian ethnic appearance accounted for 26% of terrorism-related arrests, down 12 percentage points. The proportion of those arrested who were of Black ethnic appearance was 4%, down five percentage points compared with the previous year. Those of 'Other' ethnic appearance accounted for 16% of arrests, up eight percentage points on the previous year.

Of those arrested, 82% considered themselves to be of British or British dual nationality, up four percentage points on the previous year and the highest proportion in a calendar year since the data collection began. The proportion increased from 33% in the year ending September 2002 to 80% in the year ending September 2015 and has not fallen below 69% since.

In the year ending September 30, 2021, 62 persons were tried for terrorism-related offenses, an increase of nine (17%) from the 53 persons in the previous year, but a fall of 29 (32%) from the peak of 91 trials in the year ending September 2018. Of the 62 persons tried for terrorism-related offenses, 58 were convicted.

Of the 58 persons convicted of terrorism-related offenses, 41 (71%) pleaded guilty and 17 (29%) entered a not-guilty plea. This was a higher proportion compared with the previous year, when 28 of the 48 persons convicted (58%) entered a guilty plea.

The most common sentence length in the latest year was of less than four years, which accounted for 43% of sentences (25 of 58 convictions). Of these, 16 sentences were between one and four years (28% of total), and nine were less than a year (16% of total). There were also 20 sentence lengths between four and 10 years, accounting for 34% of sentences (20 of 58 convictions). Those given a life sentence accounted for 3% of all those sentenced in the latest year (two sentences), seven percentage points lower than the previous year (five of 48 convictions). There were no sentences of 10 years or more, a decrease of two compared with the previous year. The number of non-custodial sentences increased from seven to 11 in the latest year.

As of September 30, 2021, there were 218 persons in custody for terrorism-connected offenses in the U.K.

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HEADLINE	12/09 No arrests, no probe: drone attack Iraq PM
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.vice.com/en/article/7kb8wd/zero-arrests-and-zero-answers-a-month-after-iraqs-pm-mustafa-al-kadhimi-survived-a-drone-attack">https://www.vice.com/en/article/7kb8wd/zero-arrests-and-zero-answers-a-month-after-iraqs-pm-mustafa-al-kadhimi-survived-a-drone-attack</a>
GIST	<p>On the 7th of November rockets dropped from several drones crashed onto the roof of the residence of Iraq's prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi. But in a country riven by nearly 20 years of sectarian conflict, the wildest part of the episode is that no one is brave enough to investigate what actually happened.</p> <p>Kadhimi was not hurt in the Baghdad assassination attempt, but six of his guards were injured. Still, it's clear that there is a lack of political will to investigate the powerful Iran-backed paramilitary groups that have been widely blamed for the attack. A sloppy investigation by a police force that fears the militias has so far led to no arrests or charges.</p> <p>Iraq's divided and corrupt government has struggled to contain several Iran-backed militias, which continue to refuse to accept October's general election results. The political parties linked to the militias lost two-thirds of their parliamentary seats – a significant blow to their power and influence in the country. They have since claimed, without any evidence, that the historically low turnout polls were marred by mass fraud.</p> <p>While the groups have denied any involvement in the incident, they have repeatedly used the same locally made drones in similar attacks in the past few years targeting US bases in Baghdad and Erbil, which they claimed responsibility under a number of made-up names. Despite the relative calm in the Iraqi capital since the attack, the militias continue to pose a threat to a fragile government that struggles to even name the groups that tried to kill its prime minister, and tensions are mounting.</p>

Iran-backed militias fought foreign troops periodically from the US-led invasion in 2003 until 2011, when most US troops left.

Groups such as Kataib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq enjoy Iranian funding and training and are among the more extreme branches that work as part of an Iranian proxy network of armed groups across the region under the flag of an anti-Western "axis of resistance."

Members of an umbrella organisation – now known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces, an alliance of armed forces – the Iran-backed Iraqi groups have gained enormous influence over the country's security and institutions owing to their help dismantling the so-called ISIS caliphate. The groups were technically drafted under the Iraqi national security apparatus in the battle against the Sunni extremists and even managed to form a strong coalition inside Iraq's parliament and play a vital role in government in 2018 until the brutality they inflicted upon civilians lost them their popularity in 2021's elections.

Iranian officials moved to distance themselves from the attack on Kadhimi, rushing to condemn it, and the country's top general and foreign military strategist, Ismail Qaani, reportedly flew to Baghdad to try and defuse the situation.

The Iraqi security forces collected evidence from the aftermath of the attack that included parts of "locally made" drones shot down by the guards, and an unexploded rocket on the roof of the building.

Qais al Khazali, the leader of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, questioned whether the drone attack had even taken place in a televised address, saying: "Targeting of the prime minister's house, if true, is serious and cannot be tolerated at all."

Khazali also criticised Kadhimi for blocking two "factions" from the militia groups in the investigation into the attempted assassination. "We sent a message to the committee charged with the investigation. You must provide concrete evidence and real proof, not allegations," he added.

But the investigation committee tasked with probing the attack is not exactly making progress: it is yet to officially identify any individual or party in connection.

Last week, Qasim al-Araji, Iraq's national security adviser, held a press conference to present the evidence collected by an investigation committee. He showed footage from CCTV records showing the impact of the explosion on the house. Araji criticised the process of evidence-handling after the bomb squad detonated an unexploded projectile without collecting fingerprints from it first.

"We have launched an investigation into this matter and are asking for justification on the decision to not collect fingerprints," said Araji, urging political parties to come forward and help the investigation identify the people behind the attack.

While Kadhimi came out right after the attack to say that "We will pursue those who committed yesterday's crime; we know them well, and we will expose them," the former spy chief is in a weak position: he is only serving in a caretaker role until a new government is formed, and is seen by many as a puppet of the US, which still has 2,500 troops stationed in the country to fight ISIS in what the US says is at the invitation of the Iraqi government.

US President Joe Biden met with Kadhimi in July this year in Washington, signalling his administration's commitment to the Iraqi government. It was announced that US troops' status would shift from deployment to an advisory role in Iraq by the end of 2021.

But the latest drone attack showed how far the Iran-backed militias are willing to go to push the local authorities after suffering a defeat in the latest elections. The Iraqi government inside the fortified Green Zone in Baghdad may have heard the message from the militias, but with a newly-elected parliament entering lengthy coalition government negotiations, it's unlikely tensions will drop anytime soon.

HEADLINE	<b>12/09 US-led troops end Iraq combat mission</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-security-adviser-says-international-coalition-ends-combat-mission-no-us-2021-12-09/">https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-security-adviser-says-international-coalition-ends-combat-mission-no-us-2021-12-09/</a>
GIST	<p>BAGHDAD, Dec 9 (Reuters) - U.S.-led forces have ended their combat mission in Iraq, a move that transfers all remaining troops into a training and advising role, Iraqi military commanders and officials from the coalition led by the United States said on Thursday.</p> <p>Western security officials and diplomats say privately that this will make little difference to the number of troops stationed in the country - currently more than 2,000 - since those forces have had limited involvement in any combat operations for the last couple of years.</p> <p>The U.S.-led coalition began its mission in 2014 to defeat Islamic State, after the militants took over vast areas of Iraq and neighbouring Syria.</p> <p>Since the group's military defeat in 2017, Islamic State fighters have been unable to hold territory but are waging a continued low-level insurgency that regularly kills Iraqi soldiers and civilians in remote mountain and desert areas.</p> <p>The coalition has also come under dozens of rocket and drone attacks by Iran-backed Shi'ite militias that helped defeat the Sunni extremist Islamic State and which say there is no longer a justification for Western forces to be in Iraq.</p> <p>"As we complete our combat role, we will remain here to advise, assist, and enable the ISF (Iraqi security forces), at the invitation of Republic of Iraq," coalition commander Major General John W. Brennan, Jr. said in a statement.</p> <p>Iraqi commander Lieutenant General Abdul Amir al-Shammari said Iraqi forces were ready to handle the Islamic State threat.</p> <p>"Today, we renew our partnership with the Coalition, who are now serving in a new capacity – with a mission to advise, assist, and enable our brave military warriors," he said.</p> <p>U.S. President Joe Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi sealed an agreement in July to formally end the U.S. combat mission in Iraq by the end of 2021.</p> <p>Iraqi Shi'ite militants have vowed to wage new attacks against coalition forces in 2022.</p> <p>Western security and diplomatic officials say that calling the shift a withdrawal, as it has sometimes been characterized by the Iraqi government, is misleading because it changes little in terms of the number of forces based in Iraq.</p> <p>The U.S. has kept around 2,500 troops in Iraq since 2020. The Western officials say that most of those forces have been operating only in a training and advising role for some time.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Pakistani Taliban will not extend cease-fire</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/pakistani-taliban-extend-cess-fire-government-81656917">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/pakistani-taliban-extend-cess-fire-government-81656917</a>
GIST	<p>ISLAMABAD -- The Pakistani Taliban said Thursday they will not extend a cease-fire agreed to last month, accusing the government in Islamabad of not honoring the truce and failing to release 102 of their fighters.</p>

The militant group, also known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, has been behind numerous attacks on Pakistani security forces and civilians over the last 14 years. TTP was also behind a 2014 attack on an army-run school in the northwestern city of Peshawar that killed 154 people, mostly schoolchildren.

They are a separate group from the Taliban in Afghanistan, who took over that country in August. However, the two groups are close allies and TTP leaders and fighters have over the years sought sanctuary across the border in Afghanistan.

A statement from TTP spokesman Mohammad Khurasani claimed that despite the agreement on the cease-fire — which went into effect on Nov. 9 and was meant to give time for peace talks between the two sides — government forces are continuing to carry out operations against the group. The truce expires at midnight.

“It is not possible to carry on with the cease-fire in these circumstances,” Khurasani said.

There was no immediate comment from the Pakistani authorities.

The Pakistani Taliban have been emboldened by the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan and there have been concerns of renewed violence within Pakistan. About a million people were displaced when Pakistan launched operations in the northwest in 2013 to clear out TTP fighters. They returned to their homes after 2017, when Pakistan claimed victory against the militants.

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## Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Missing Tulalip woman: \$60,000 reward</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/60000-reward-offered-in-case-of-missing-tulalip-woman">https://www.q13fox.com/news/60000-reward-offered-in-case-of-missing-tulalip-woman</a>
GIST	<p><b>MARYSVILLE, Wash.</b> - The Tulalip Police Department and the FBI are asking for the public's help in finding 40-year-old Mary Johnson, who was reported missing a year ago to date.</p> <p>She was last seen walking on Fire Trail Road in Tulalip on Nov. 25, 2020. She arranged to meet a friend on Fire Trail for a ride to Arlington. She never arrived at her destination and has not been in contact with friends or family since.</p> <p>Her husband reported her missing on Dec. 9.</p> <p>"These crimes are often perpetrated on the most vulnerable victims and families and victims have not always had a strong voice and advocacy," said Tulalip Tribal Police Chief Chris Sutter. "We're changing that. Here in Tulalip, we're working on a community tribal community response plan to engage all of our partners, not only in law enforcement but in victim services, media and community resources. We're trying to change that narrative that these cases don't historically get solved very rapidly or at all."</p> <p>Johnson is 5'6" and weighs 115 pounds. She is an enrolled member of the Tulalip Tribes. She has black hair and brown eyes, a scar across her nose, and a birthmark on the back of her neck. She also has a sunburst tattoo on her upper right arm.</p> <p>The FBI and Tulalip Tribes are offering \$10,000 and \$50,000 rewards, respectively, for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for her disappearance.</p> <p>Sutter said the organization has a list of people of interest that they are working from, but still are looking into new leads and tips.</p> <p>If you have any information on the whereabouts of Mary Johnson, contact Tulalip Tribal Police at (360) 716-5918. Case #20-3063.</p>

	"Don't be afraid to tell police, even if it's the smallest thing. Please come forward and talk to police," said Johnson's sister, Nona Blouin.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 State EMD: widespread 911 outages</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3275262/alert-seattle-911-down/">https://mynorthwest.com/3275262/alert-seattle-911-down/</a>
GIST	<p>A number of counties across Washington state were reporting a 911 outage Thursday.</p> <p>As of 5 p.m., the Washington Emergency Management Division said it has been told that "most 911 services have been restored," adding that the incident will be investigated by the state 911 office in coordination with local counties.</p> <p>Clallam, Jefferson, Kitsap, Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish, and King were reporting issues with their 911 services Thursday, according to the Washington Emergency Management Division. A state trooper reported that Thurston and Pierce counties were also affected by the outage.</p> <p>Find alternate non-emergency phone numbers for your area <a href="#">here</a>. Do not test 911 during an outage.</p> <p>Most Seattle residents probably <a href="#">received an alert on their phones</a> around 4:10 p.m. Thursday. The Seattle Police Department said 911 appeared to be down through the region, but services have been restored as of 5:30 p.m. People were instructed to call the non-emergency line at 206-625-5011 for Seattle-based emergencies until 911 came back online.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Climate crisis hitting wine industry hard</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/09/climate-crisis-wine-industry">https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/09/climate-crisis-wine-industry</a>
GIST	<p>Summer 2020 was a rough year for <a href="#">Hope Well Wine</a>'s owner, Mimi Casteel. Wildfires spread throughout Oregon, not far from land that she leased to grow more than 20 acres of grapes. The smoke was so bad she had to disable the fire alarms in her home. A gray cloud loomed in the distance for days.</p> <p>"The fires were not super close but were severe enough, burned long enough that we were in very thick smoke for more than a week," Casteel said. At the time she was selling about 80% of the fruit she grew but last year's wildfire caused <a href="#">smoke taint</a> – where grapes absorb smoke, affecting the quality of wine they produce. She lost all of her big clients, she said – "they walked out on their contracts". Casteel had no smoke insurance to cover these losses, which she estimated to amount to about \$300,000.</p> <p>In <a href="#">the 1960s</a>, when Oregon's wine industry started to grow significantly, the historically temperate state seemed like the ideal place for growing grapes for a <a href="#">variety of wines</a>, such as chardonnay and pinot noir. But, said Casteel, "almost as soon as that identity was starting to be recognized ... we were facing a loss of that". The impacts of the climate crisis are making the industry much more precarious.</p> <p>Advertisement</p> <p>The total area burned during the 2020 wildfire season was among the largest in Oregon's recorded history, according to the Oregon <a href="#">climate assessment</a> published in January. The report projected that temperatures would continue to increase and wildfires would get bigger.</p> <p>It's a story that's playing out globally. Grapes for wine making are grown across <a href="#">the world</a> including countries in Europe, South America and Africa. But as the climate crisis intensifies – bringing increasingly severe wildfires, warmer summers, milder winters as well as unpredictable frosts and rainfall – it is changing wine production.</p> <p>Grapes are among the most sensitive crops to climate changes. For some producers, warming temperatures have been advantageous, at least in the short term. Changing rain patterns, earlier springs and droughts are starting to <a href="#">push wine production</a> towards the poles. There are vineyards as far north as <a href="#">Norway's Flatdal</a></p>



[region](#). And vineyards in countries such as [England](#) have been thriving as Europe experiences [warming temperatures](#).

However, for many wine growers the climate crisis is making life much harder. If temperatures rise too quickly, grapes will ripen faster than usual affecting the flavor of the wine. If temperatures plunge, it can devastate vineyards – destroying buds, reducing yield and even killing the vines. Premium grapes for high end wine, in particular, flourish in a [very narrow range of weather conditions](#).

Nenad Trifunović, the director of business development at Croatian wine and beer retailer [The Wine & More](#), said making wine is part of his region’s cultural heritage – the Balkan peninsula has been producing wine for [more than 2,000 years](#). Growers used to rely on regular seasonal changes and rainfall patterns but that’s changed, Trifunović said. This past summer countries across the Balkan peninsula, including Croatia, experienced [heatwaves](#) that lasted longer than they have historically.

The climate crisis will also increase the frequency of droughts in Croatia, according to a 2021 [study](#), which Trifunović says is a challenge as growers in the country scramble to work around changing precipitation patterns. “Even the oldest of vineyards are struggling with an abundance of heat and lack of rain,” he said.

Diana Snowden Seysses is based in Burgundy, one of France’s most well-known wine growing regions, where she works with her father-in-law making wine at [Domaine Dujac](#). Her family also owns and runs [Snowden Wines](#) in Napa Valley. Last year, her family’s vineyard in California lost about half of its production to smoke taint caused by wildfires in the area. And producers in Burgundy saw an early spring that was followed by unseasonable frosts that damaged grapes on the vine. Domaine Dujac also lost some of its grape crop to the frost.

Wine production in France is expected to drop by [almost 30%](#) this year. Snowden Seysses estimated that some of the vineyards around her lost about half of their grapes to the frost. The frost was “an agricultural disaster [and a] natural disaster”, she said, adding: “So it’s not just heat; it’s erratic weather patterns”.

Winemakers in the region are considering making changes in how they work with vines in the hope of saving future harvests, said Snowden Seysses. She described how some growers let a long shoot grow on the vine and once growers know that spring has officially started and the frost won’t come back, the top of the shoot is cut off. This method can slow down the vine’s growth so that fewer potential buds are lost to the frost.

Snowden Seysses also said that Domaine Dujac is looking to plant fruit trees to provide better shade and humidity to protect grapes during unseasonably hot days, but there are challenges to implementing that method.

“[Burgundy’s] vineyards are [Unesco protected](#),” said Snowden Seysses. “We have to ask for authorization for every single tree because it was not there before the Unesco protection. But historically there were fruit trees.”

In [Oregon](#), Casteel has changed her setup, too. She has downsized the vineyard to only two and a half acres to ensure that the work needed to grow and then harvest the grapes can be done quickly. She has also invested in smoke insurance. After seeing how vulnerable pinot noir grapes are to smoke taint, Casteel plans to turn her efforts towards white wine varieties. “The scale of the business is just altogether much smaller,” she said.

Climate focused wine groups have sprung up in recent years to help producers in the industry navigate climate issues. The [Porto Protocol](#), an international non-profit that aims to make the wine industry more sustainable, gives its members access to resources for tackling climate problems. Members can also learn from others, said Marta Mendonça, the manager at Porto Protocol. Those living in areas which have long experienced dry seasons and water scarcity, for example, can advise on irrigation methods or varieties of grapes that can thrive with less precipitation.

	“There is no time nor resources to lose when it comes to fighting climate change. We have to fight as an industry collectively and collaboratively,” Mendonça said.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Abuse in nursing homes hidden from public</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/business/nursing-home-abuse-inspection.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/business/nursing-home-abuse-inspection.html</a>
GIST	<p>In Arizona, a nursing home resident was sexually assaulted in the dining room.</p> <p>In Minnesota, a woman caught Covid-19 after workers moved a coughing resident into her room. And in Texas, a woman with dementia was found in her nursing home’s parking lot, lying in a pool of blood.</p> <p>State inspectors determined that all three homes had endangered residents and violated federal regulations. Yet the federal government didn’t report the incidents to the public or factor them into its influential ratings system. The homes kept their glowing grades.</p> <p>A New York Times investigation found that at least 2,700 similarly dangerous incidents were also not factored into the <a href="#">rating system</a> run by the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, or C.M.S., which is designed to give people reliable information to evaluate the safety and quality of thousands of nursing homes.</p> <p>Many of the incidents were uncovered by state inspectors and verified by their supervisors, but quashed during a secretive appeals process, according to a review of thousands of pages of inspection reports and nursing home appeals, which The Times obtained via public-records requests. Others were omitted from the C.M.S. ratings website because of what regulators describe as a technical glitch.</p> <p>The Times this year has documented a series of problems with Medicare’s ratings system. Much of the data that powers the system is <a href="#">wrong</a> and often makes nursing homes seem cleaner and safer than they are. The rating system <a href="#">also obscures</a> how many residents are receiving powerful antipsychotic drugs.</p> <p>But the problems with the inspection process, which are the core of the ratings system, are the most consequential. On-the-ground inspections are the most important factor in determining how many stars homes receive in Medicare’s rating system. The reports that inspectors produce give the public an unvarnished view inside facilities that house many of the country’s most vulnerable citizens.</p> <p>On the rare occasions when inspectors issue severe citations, nursing homes can fight them through an appeals process that operates almost entirely in secret. If nursing homes don’t get the desired outcome via the informal review, they can appeal to a special federal court inside the executive branch. That process, too, is hidden from the public.</p> <p>Even when the citations are upheld by this federal court, some never make their way onto the Medicare website, known as Care Compare. In November, for example, the court <a href="#">sustained</a> a major punishment against Life Care Center of Kirkland, Wash. — the nursing home that faced the first coronavirus outbreak in the United States — <a href="#">yet the citation is absent</a> from the Medicare site. The facility has a five-star rating.</p> <p>The pattern gives nursing homes a powerful incentive to pursue every available appeal. Even if they lose, the process eats up time and reduces the odds of damaging information ever becoming public.</p> <p>“There is every advantage to the facility not to have an opinion issued for as long as they could possibly delay, and there’s no advantage to the public for that to occur,” said Richard Routman, a lawyer who represented the federal government in nursing home appeals until 2014.</p> <p>“Once I realized that people wouldn’t see cases that are on appeal, I thought, why would anybody ever look at this again?”</p>

Representatives of the nursing home industry say it is only fair that they be allowed to appeal citations before they are made public, especially since many end up getting overturned or downgraded. But The Times found that the appeals process can be one-sided, excluding patients and their families.

Jonathan Blum, the chief operating officer for C.M.S., said that citations are omitted during state-level appeals to be fair to nursing homes that are disputing inspectors' findings. He acknowledged that even after appeals are exhausted, some citations still don't appear on Care Compare. He said C.M.S. is "working to correct this issue."

### **'Kinder and Gentler'**

The biggest component of nursing homes' star ratings are the inspections conducted by state health investigators. Facilities that ace their inspections are on track to get up to five stars, whereas those that flunk will struggle to get more than one or two stars.

There's big money at stake. Because of the weight that people place on the star ratings, researchers have found a connection between better inspection results and greater profits. The Times analyzed nursing homes' financial statements from 2019 and [found](#) that four- and five-star facilities were much more profitable than lower-rated facilities. (For-profit companies own about 70 percent of all U.S. nursing homes.)

Inspectors visit every nursing home once a year or so for general inspections and in response to complaints. They spend several days combing through medical records, tagging along with nurses and aides as they do their work, interviewing staff and residents and even testing the temperature of the morning coffee.

When inspectors encounter problems, they can propose issuing a citation. First, though, they must build a case by compiling things like witness statements and medical records. Supervisors often vet citations before they're issued to ensure that violations are properly investigated and documented.

The vast majority of citations are minor. But a fraction are deemed serious, faulting nursing homes for putting their residents in "immediate jeopardy" or causing "actual harm." On each nursing home's listing on Care Compare, there is a section that shows whether they have received any such citation in recent years.

The violations then are incorporated into a formula that helps determine a facility's star rating. The more severe the violations, the heavier the toll on the rating.

For decades, federal watchdog agencies [have criticized](#) state inspectors for taking [a light touch](#) with the nursing homes they oversee.

Inspectors rarely deem problems [to be serious enough](#) to harm homes' star ratings. From 2017 to 2019, The Times found, inspectors wrote up more than 2,000 five-star facilities at least once for not following basic infection-control precautions, like having employees regularly wash their hands.

At 40 other five-star homes, inspectors determined that sexual abuse did not constitute actual harm or put residents in immediate jeopardy.

The reasons are complicated. Inspectors tend to be overworked and poorly paid. Writing up a facility for a serious violation requires extra paperwork and additional visits to check that the home has fixed the problem.

Another factor, inspectors say, is that they have been conditioned to expect blowback when they cite homes for serious problems.

“I feel sometimes the things I cite don’t mean anything because it gets tossed out at the state level or they determine it not to be as severe,” an unnamed inspector said in a [2013 survey](#) conducted by the Center for Medicare Advocacy, a consumer rights group. “Sometimes it makes you wonder why we spin our wheels on a problem.”

Public officials have urged inspectors to nudge nursing homes to improve, instead of punishing them. Oklahoma’s inspections agency referred to nursing homes as its “clients,” according to a letter from the agency reviewed by The Times. Inspectors in Pennsylvania complained about being told to be “kinder and gentler” with nursing homes, according to the 2013 survey. Last year, in the depths of the pandemic, the California department of health told inspectors to act as safety “consultants” to nursing homes and to not take on an enforcement role. (The policy was scrapped after inspectors objected.)

In Arkansas, some inspectors said supervisors discouraged them from citing homes for immediate jeopardy or actual harm, even when they spotted dangerous conditions.

“Deficiencies are thrown out all the time,” said Lisa Thomas, who previously oversaw the training of the state’s inspectors. (She said she was fired in 2019 after complaining to the governor’s office about the agency.)

Gavin Lesnick, a spokesman for the Arkansas Department of Human Services, denied that inspectors were discouraged from citing nursing homes for serious violations. He also denied that Ms. Thomas was fired for her complaint. “The safety and health of the patients is our number-one priority, and why all of our staff come to work every day,” he said.

### **Keeping Data Secret**

When the state issues a citation against a nursing home, federal rules give the facility the right to appeal through what’s known as an informal dispute resolution process. The home can argue that inspectors were mistaken in their findings or that their proposed punishment was overly harsh.

Such reviews are supposed to take 60 days, but they sometimes drag on for more than a year, The Times found. Mr. Blum, the C.M.S. official, said facilities were required to fix any problems regardless of whether they appealed.

Procedures vary among states. Sometimes, the agency that issued the initial violation reviews its own work. Other times, states ask a nonprofit organization to make the decision. In Massachusetts, the process is [left to a panel](#) where a majority of members either represent or have worked for nursing homes. In Indiana, nursing home residents and their family are [not permitted](#) to attend hearings.

If a nursing home prevails, the citation is made less severe or deleted from the record altogether. While the review is underway, the inspectors’ findings are not posted on the Care Compare website.

That’s why there is no public accounting of what happened at Sauer Health Care, a nursing home [with five stars](#) in eastern Minnesota, in April 2020.

State inspectors found that as Covid was spreading through the home — five residents would die in less than a month — the staff was not exercising basic precautions. Employees weren’t removing protective gear after they left a sick person’s room. The home wasn’t consistently screening staff for Covid symptoms. In one case, inspectors found that the home moved a resident who was coughing and had an elevated temperature into the room of a woman who had no symptoms. Both eventually tested positive for the virus.

Inspectors concluded that Sauer had placed its residents in immediate jeopardy. They ordered the home to develop an emergency plan to fix the problems, according to their 21-page report, which The Times obtained through an open-records request.

The nursing home appealed the ruling through the informal dispute resolution process and is still awaiting a decision, said Sara Blair, the administrator of Sauer Health. She wouldn't explain the basis for the home's appeal.

While decisions in these cases aren't made public, homes like Sauer stand a good chance of winning. The Times asked public health agencies in all 50 states how often citations were upheld, reduced in severity or deleted entirely since 2016. Eighteen states provided figures. About 37 percent of the time, the nursing homes succeeded in getting citations removed or reduced in severity.

The success rate varied from state to state. In Massachusetts, 36 percent of the citations that nursing homes appealed ended up being deleted. In Connecticut, facilities were successful at either erasing or reducing the severity of citations nearly half the time.

Multiple states declined to provide the data to The Times; two, Missouri and Florida, said they had been told not to by C.M.S. The federal agency declined to disclose nationwide figures to The Times.

Nursing homes say that the relatively high rate of successful appeals is a sign of problems with the inspection process.

"If I was the chief executive of a company and looking at an error rate of 40 percent, I'd think what is going wrong," said Margaret Chamberlain, a lawyer who represents nursing homes.

But the appeals process tilts in favor of nursing homes because the facilities are the only ones to make their case; residents and their families are shut out of the process.

Regardless of the reason, visitors to the Care Compare website have no way of knowing if they are getting an incomplete picture of problems at a nursing home.

### **Heroin in a Purse**

If a nursing home loses in the informal process, it can appeal to administrative law judges working for the Department of Health and Human Services. During that process, the citations are supposed to — but often don't — appear on the Care Compare website.

These cases play out in courtrooms. But unlike most legal cases, there are no public dockets, where members of the public can look up the status of cases, the next court date or the latest legal filings. (A spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services said the docket was private because filings in these cases often contain "sensitive information protected from public disclosure.")

In April 2020, a team of state inspectors arrived at Brooke Knoll Village, a nursing home in Avon, Ind. They found the home had failed to isolate residents who were suspected of having Covid-19. The state concluded that Brooke Knoll had placed residents in immediate jeopardy, according to inspection documents reviewed by The Times.

Brooke Knoll, which didn't respond to requests for comment, lost its initial appeal through Indiana's informal dispute process, and it is appealing the violation to the federal government. A finding of immediate jeopardy often lowers a nursing home's star rating, but Brooke Knoll still has five stars, and the citation does not appear on Care Compare.

Instead, the site says, ["no health deficiencies found."](#)

"How do they get away with that?" said Tammy Bowman, whose sister was a resident at Brooke Knoll and contracted Covid just before the inspectors arrived at the home. She later died from the disease.

"I feel like you can't hide something like that when we're talking about somebody's life," Ms. Bowman said.

The appeals often shed light on serious violations that never made it onto Care Compare. The Times reviewed 76 federal administrative decisions published in 2020 and 2021. Ten violations that were upheld by the court were not posted to the federal website and didn't affect the homes' star ratings.

People checking Care Compare never found out that a resident was arrested at the Voorhees Care and Rehabilitation Center in New Jersey after being spotted placing heroin in another resident's purse, and that a third resident died of an overdose.

The public never found out that inspectors cited another New Jersey nursing home, Rehab at River's Edge, for failing to protect a fragile resident who fell seven separate times, at one point fracturing her foot.

And the public never found out that a resident at the Golden Living Center nursing home in Morgantown, W.Va., crashed to the ground and died after staff mistakenly removed the safety rails from his bed.

In all three of those cases, the state inspectors' findings were upheld by a federal judge.

Mr. Blum, the C.M.S. official, didn't say why such citations had never appeared on Care Compare. He said the agency was working to fix the problem. (The three homes declined to comment or didn't respond to requests for comment. Golden Living is under new management.)

Dr. David Gifford, the chief medical officer of the American Health Care Association, which represents the nursing home industry, said the group's members believed the appeals process should be faster and more transparent. He said Medicare should not post the results of inspections that are in dispute.

### **Found on the Pavement**

On paper, Hilltop Rehabilitation, a sprawling ranch-style nursing home in Weatherford, Texas, seems like a place where little ever goes wrong. On Medicare's rating website, the facility has won the highest scores on its health inspections for four years straight, not incurring a single serious infraction.

What's missing from that picture, though, is what happened to Alan Hart's mother, Laverne.

In 2014, he placed the 87-year-old retired children's book author, who had dementia, at Hilltop because he was having trouble caring for her on his own.

Mr. Hart said it broke his heart to move her, but he thought she would be in good hands at the five-star nursing home, which planned to keep her on a supervised, locked floor.

In August 2015, Ms. Hart was left alone and tumbled from her wheelchair, injuring her shoulder, according to court documents and her son.

Then, shortly before Christmas, Ms. Hart was alone again. She wheeled herself out of unlocked doors to the facility's parking lot, where she fell, smashing her face on the pavement. It was just above freezing outside, and she was wearing only a thin nightgown. More than 30 minutes had passed before she was found on the ground, her hair matted with blood and her nose broken.

Mr. Hart, a police officer, was at work when he got the call. As he sped to Hilltop, he prepared for the worst. "I thought she was dead for sure," he said. "They didn't supervise her at all."

Inspectors agreed. They hit the facility with an immediate jeopardy citation for not properly supervising Ms. Hart, even though the home knew she was prone to wandering. The inspectors also faulted Hilltop for allowing her to fall on several occasions and for unnecessarily drugging her.



Hilltop, which didn't respond to requests for comment, appealed the inspectors' citation through the informal review process. The home lost. Then Hilltop appealed to the federal government. Four years later, in June 2020, an administrative law judge upheld the inspectors' original findings.

C.M.S. never posted the citation off the Care Compare website. Hilltop has a nearly spotless inspection record.

### **Assault at the Dinner Table**

Every year, C.M.S. sends special teams to about 5 percent of nursing homes to double-check state inspectors' work. The idea is to enforce consistency and ensure that individual states are holding homes accountable to federal standards of nursing care.

Studies have found that [federal inspectors tend to find more serious problems](#) than their state counterparts during these examinations. But the Medicare agency does not publish the reports of its own inspectors — even when they turn up dangerous or deadly conditions — or factor them into homes' star ratings.

The Times reviewed details of three federal inspection reports.

One involved the Lakeview Manor nursing home in Indianapolis. In March 2020, federal workers were following up on a state inspection from two months earlier when they found that Lakeview had placed a resident in danger by installing the wrong rails on her bed, increasing the risk that she would get entangled in them.

The same month, at Landerbrook Transitional Care in Mayfield Heights, Ohio, federal investigators discovered a woman smoking a cigarette while connected to a flammable oxygen tank.

The federal inspectors determined that both situations risked causing severe injury or death. Neither was disclosed to the public. (Representatives of Lakeview and Landerbrook didn't respond to requests for comment.)

Mr. Blum of C.M.S. said federal surveys were excluded from the ratings system because they were designed to “assess a state survey agency's performance,” not the quality of nursing homes.

Sun Health La Loma Care Center in Litchfield, Ariz., has [a five-star rating](#). In January 2018, a 76-year-old woman went there to recover from surgery for a fractured femur. On her second evening there, a male resident beckoned her to his dinner table. Moments after she sat down, he pinched her breast. Terrified, the woman refused to eat in the dining room for the remainder of her stay.

When state inspectors visited Sun Health in June 2018, they said they could not substantiate the assault. Later that summer, though, federal inspectors came to a different conclusion.

They found that the male resident had a history of assaulting staff. The week before the incident in the dining room, he had groped his occupational therapist on three separate occasions. The nursing home had added a note to the man's record warning staff to keep him away from female residents.

The federal inspectors cited the nursing home for causing actual harm to residents by failing to follow its own guidance and for allowing the assault to take place.

Ken Reinstein, a spokesman for Sun Health, said the nursing home disagrees with the federal finding and “cares very deeply about its residents and the care they receive.”

The only thing that visitors to Sun Health's entry on Care Compare see are the minor issues identified by state inspectors. There is no trace of the serious problems uncovered by their federal counterparts.



HEADLINE	12/09 Ruin, resilience after summer heat wave
SOURCE	<a href="https://crosscut.com/environment/2021/12/pnw-scientists-find-ruin-and-resilience-after-summer-heat-wave">https://crosscut.com/environment/2021/12/pnw-scientists-find-ruin-and-resilience-after-summer-heat-wave</a>
GIST	<p>During the past summer's stifling heat wave, Robin Fales patrolled the same sweep of shore on Washington's San Juan Island every day at low tide. The stench of rotting sea life grew as temperatures edged toward triple digits — roughly 30 degrees above average — and Fales watched the beds of kelp that she studies wilt and fade. "They were bleaching more than I had ever seen," recalled Fales, a Ph.D. candidate and marine ecologist at the University of Washington. She didn't know whether they would make it.</p> <p>Never in recorded history had the Pacific Northwest experienced anything like the "heat dome" that clamped down on the region in late June 2021. Temperatures reached a withering 116 degrees Fahrenheit in Portland and 121 degrees in Lytton, British Columbia — the highest ever recorded north of the 45th parallel.</p> <p>Scientists said the event would have been "virtually impossible" without climate change. It killed hundreds of people, damaged roads and power lines, and devastated crops. It also caused widespread ecological fallout, the full extent of which scientists have yet to grasp.</p> <p>Initial reports were sobering: A billion shellfish and other intertidal animals baked to death on the coast of British Columbia. The Portland Audubon Society declared a "hawkpocalypse," as it tended to scores of sick and injured birds. And in eastern Oregon, state officials estimated that tens of thousands of sculpin, a bottom-dwelling fish, perished in streams already throttled by drought.</p> <p>By fall, headlines and memories had faded, but the heat wave's impacts linger on. In fact, researchers have learned that short bursts of high temperatures can pose a greater threat to plants and animals than long-term warming, and may even increase the risk of extinction.</p> <p>In one recent study, researchers looked at 538 species from around the world, nearly half of which had already disappeared in at least one location. They found that the doomed populations endured greater (and faster) increases in maximum yearly temperature than others. Surprisingly, though, they often experienced smaller changes in average temperature, said John Wiens, an evolutionary ecologist at the University of Arizona and a co-author of the study. "The most important variable is these hottest summer temperatures."</p> <p>Extreme heat can kill organisms outright, especially if they are also exposed to intense sunlight. Dehydration sets in and organs fail as enzymes stop working and proteins sustain damage. The trauma can make survivors more susceptible to disease and predation, and reduce or delay reproduction. Hot weather can also cost animals by discouraging them from foraging or hunting. And these events are happening more often: By 2040, heat waves are projected to become 12 times as frequent as in a nonwarming world.</p> <p>After the latest episode in the Pacific Northwest, researchers began tracking the damage to a variety of species and ecosystems, like coastal forests, which fared especially poorly. Scorched leaves turned hillsides sickly shades of orange, and trees already stressed by drought dropped their needles prematurely.</p> <p>But the deadliest impacts may be invisible, said Christine Buhl, an entomologist at the Oregon Department of Forestry: Thirsty trees, for example, may have suffered damage to their roots and vascular systems, if they couldn't pull enough moisture from the ground. "We will know in coming years how bad it was," Buhl said.</p> <p>Australia provides a grim preview. After a string of heat waves hit the western part of the country in 2010 and 2011, scientists documented widespread tree death, among other impacts, which later contributed to beetle outbreaks and wildfires, said Joe Fontaine, a fire ecologist at Murdoch University in Perth. Even now, he said, "you can still go around and find the legacy of that event."</p> <p>Yet heat waves may also help species adapt to long-term warming by driving rapid evolutionary changes, said Lauren Buckley, a climate change ecologist at the University of Washington. They can weed out unfit individuals, giving those that tolerate hotter temperatures an advantage. Scientists have seen evidence for</p>

such shifts in populations of Douglas fir and fruit flies. But “there’s sort of a sweet spot,” Buckley said, between a stress test and a massacre.

It’s too early to know whether the recent temperature spike hit the sweet spot for some — if any — Northwest species. On San Juan Island, however, Fales found a measure of hope. After the heat wave, Fales surveyed the damage to the kelp she studies and determined that while it had lost about half its biomass, most of the plants were still alive. Many mussels survived, too.

That may be because warm spring temperatures spurred them to mount defenses before the heat wave, Fales said, by producing heat-shock proteins, for example, that repair other damaged proteins. But there’s another possible factor: By celestial happenstance, summer low tides on the island always occur during midday, exposing intertidal organisms to peak temperatures and making it “a hotspot location,” Fales said. Perhaps the kelp and its neighbors had already begun to adapt.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Despairing log on; learn ways to die</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/09/us/where-the-despairing-log-on.html">https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/09/us/where-the-despairing-log-on.html</a>
GIST	<p><b>Editors’ note:</b> This article focuses on suicide and contains details about those who have taken their own lives. If you are having thoughts of suicide, or are concerned that someone you know may be, <a href="#">resources are available here</a>.</p> <p>As Matthew van Antwerpen, a 17-year-old in suburban Dallas, struggled with remote schooling during the pandemic last year, he grew increasingly despondent. Searching online, he found a website about suicide.</p> <p>“Any enjoyment or progress I make in my life simply comes across as forced,” he wrote on the site after signing up. “I know it is all just a distraction to blow time until the end.”</p> <p>Roberta Barbos, a 22-year-old student at the University of Glasgow, first posted after a breakup, writing that she was “unbearably lonely.” Shawn Shatto, 25, described feeling miserable at her warehouse job in Pennsylvania. And Daniel Dal Canto, a 16-year-old in Salt Lake City, shared his fears that an undiagnosed stomach ailment might never get better.</p> <p>Soon after joining, each of them was dead.</p> <p>Most suicide websites are about prevention. This one — started in March 2018 by two shadowy figures calling themselves Marquis and Serge — provides explicit directions on how to die.</p> <p>The four young members were among tens of thousands around the world who have been pulled in. On the site’s public forums, in live chats and through private messaging, they discuss hanging, poison, guns and gas. Strangers seek out partners to meet face to face and kill themselves together.</p> <p>Participants routinely nudge one another along as they share suicide plans, posting reassuring messages, thumbs-up and heart emojis, and praise for those who follow through: “brave,” “a legend,” “a hero.”</p> <p>Though members are anonymous, The New York Times identified 45 who had killed themselves in the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Canada and Australia — and found that the trail of deaths is likely much longer.</p> <p>More than 500 members — a rate of more than two a week — wrote “goodbye threads” announcing how and when they planned to end their lives, and then never posted again. In many of them, people narrated their attempts in real-time posts. Some described watching as other members live-streamed their deaths off the site.</p> <p>Most of the narratives cited the same lethal method, a preservative used for curing meat, The Times found. By promoting the preservative as a poison, the site has helped give rise to a means of suicide that is</p>

alarming some coroners and doctors. Yet many public health and law enforcement officials are unaware of it.

“It’s disgusting that anyone would create a platform like this,” said Dr. Daniel Reidenberg, a psychologist and the executive director of Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, a national nonprofit. “There’s no question that this site, the way they created it, operate it and allow it to continue, is extremely dangerous.”

While 10 of the identified suicides have been previously reported, the Times investigation reveals the broader scope of the deaths, the growing use of the poison and the influence of the site. Reporters analyzed more than 1.2 million messages from the site, examined members’ online histories, reviewed hundreds of pages of police and coroner records, and interviewed dozens of families left behind.

The site now draws six million page views a month, on average — quadruple that of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, according to data from Similarweb, a web analytics company.

Most members reported that they had experienced mental illness and were 30 or younger, according to a survey last year by the site. That age group roughly aligns with the demographic in the United States — 15 to 24 — that had the sharpest rise in suicide rate from 2009 to 2019, the most recent data available.

Among them was Matthew. Despite the strain of virtual high school, he had appeared to be looking to the future. He and his older brother were mapping out a summer road trip with friends. He had applied to Texas A&M University and intended to become a public defender.

“I want to help people,” his mother, Sharon Luft, recalled him telling her. “He was just a sweet kid.”

His other plans took shape quickly and secretly. In only 29 days, Matthew joined the site, learned of the lethal preservative and ended his life, listening to a playlist that he’d said made him nostalgic for his childhood.

“My son committed suicide at 17 two weeks ago,” Ms. Luft tweeted in January, calling out the site. “They told him how to, encouraged him after he took the mix.”

“Please help me,” she wrote, joining the calls of other parents for Marquis and Serge to be held accountable and for the banning of the site, called Sanctioned Suicide.

*In considering how much detail to provide about the website and its content, Times journalists interviewed mental health officials and suicide researchers, as well as parents and former members of the forum. Editors decided to identify the site and the preservative used in many of the suicides — as some other news outlets have done — in order to fully inform readers about the dangers they pose, particularly to the young and vulnerable.*

Australia, Germany and Italy succeeded in restricting access to the site within their borders, but American law enforcement officials, lawmakers and technology companies have been reluctant to act.

While most states have laws against assisting suicide, they are inconsistent, rarely enforced and don’t explicitly address online activity. Federal law shields website operators from liability for most harmful content posted by users. Court decisions have left unsettled questions about protected speech.

And when asked to stop steering visitors to the suicide site, the world’s most powerful search engine deflected responsibility. “Google Search holds a mirror up to what is on the internet,” a senior manager for the company wrote to Australian officials in February 2019.

Marquis and Serge have vowed to fight any efforts to take down the site. They have experience running websites with dark content: They operate several online forums for “incels,” or involuntary celibates, men who believe that women will never have sex with them because of their looks or social status. Many on those sites openly discuss a fatalistic outlook, including thoughts of self-harm.

The two men have worked to shield the suicide site and to frustrate efforts to learn who is behind it. The servers have been moved from country to country. Marquis and Serge use multiple aliases and have removed nearly every trace of their real identities from the internet. Still, The Times found them, thousands of miles apart, in a city in Alabama and the capital of Uruguay.

In online posts, Marquis repeatedly said that the site complied with U.S. law and did not permit the assisting or encouraging of suicide.

He has several times referred to the site as a “pro-choice” forum that supports members’ decisions to live or to die. “People are responsible for their own actions at the end of the day,” Marquis wrote last year, “and there’s not much we can do about that.”

### **‘You Sort of Felt Safe, but You Weren’t Safe’**

Daniel Dal Canto, a high school junior, arrived on the suicide site with little idea of how to end his life.

Three years earlier, he had been depressed, prompting his parents to steer him into months of therapy and medication. Now he was drumming in a jazz band, playing video games with friends and getting straight A’s. To those around him, including his father, a physician, the 16-year-old seemed to be doing well.

“It almost created a false sense of security for me because I thought I knew what a depressed Daniel looked like,” his mother, Pam Dal Canto, said in an interview.

But in September 2019, Daniel, expressing anxiety over his stomach pain, was gathering information and advice from the website.

It came online after Reddit shut down a group where people had been sharing suicide methods and encouraging self-harm. Reddit prohibited such discussion, as did Facebook, Twitter and other platforms. Serge wrote days after the new site opened that the two men had started working on it because they “hated to see the community disperse and disappear.” He assured users that “this isn’t our first rodeo and we know how to keep the website safe.”

On their site, Daniel could browse a “resource” thread, a table of contents linking to methods that were compiled by members and stretched for dozens of pages. Or he could click on a suicide wiki page with similar instructions. Fellow members often derided therapy and other treatments and encouraged one another to keep their suicidal intentions hidden from relatives and medical professionals.

In posts, Serge and Marquis noted their own struggles.

“Not much to tell about myself except that I’ve never really found a reason to be here,” Serge wrote. “There is little that I find worthy in this life.”

Marquis had been on the brink of suicide at one point, he disclosed. And he had concluded that the mental health system “fails everyone” and treats people with problems as “outcasts.”

Explaining the purpose of the site, he wrote, “This community was made as a place where people can freely speak about their issues without having to worry about being ‘saved’ or giving empty platitudes.”

While some of those drawn to the website described suffering from physical pain, most mentioned depression, bipolar disorder or other mental illnesses.

About half were 25 or younger, the survey showed; like Daniel, some were minors. One shared, “I’m 13, I ran away from home 1 month ago.” Another, who claimed to be 14, wrote in a post about contemplating suicide, “My dad would probably be really angry.”

The suicide rate has risen over the past 20 years in the United States. About 45,000 people take their own lives each year — more than die from traffic accidents. (That figure does not count the hundreds of physician-assisted deaths in the nine states where they are legal and restricted to the terminally ill.)

For many people, suicidal thoughts will eventually pass, experts say. Treatment and detailed plans to keep safe can help. But clinicians and researchers warn that people are much more likely to attempt suicide if they learn about methods and become convinced that it's the right thing to do. The suicide site facilitates both.

"It's like when someone's having road rage, handing them a gun," said Dr. Matthew Nock, a psychology professor and suicide researcher at Harvard University.

While there is discussion on the site about not giving up hope and the merits of staying alive, there is much more about the reasons to die. Among the most viewed posts, for example, are the "goodbye threads."

One member, a 45-year-old Englishwoman named Emma Davis, recalled feeling shocked the first time she read a goodbye thread and the messages of support it drew. But reading more and more of them, "it just becomes normal," she said in an interview.

"It felt like you were wrapping yourself up in this blanket of all of this misery and darkness," said Ms. Davis, who eventually found the site dangerous and quit. "You sort of felt safe, but you weren't safe."

Within several weeks, Daniel settled on the lethal preservative, sodium nitrite, one of the most discussed topics on the website. Members guided one another to online sellers. They advised on obtaining it without alerting family. And they shared directions for using it.

As Daniel took in the information, he asked in a post: What could he do if his attempt with the preservative failed?

Moments later, a member calling himself Stan responded.

Stan, who had shared on the site that he was depressed, divorced and largely estranged from his children, made it his mission to learn all he could about the preservative as poison. He would later write a guide on the method that turned him into a celebrity on the site.

In September 2019, when someone posted that she was planning to die by poisoning the next night, Stan quickly replied, "Keep talking to us, you are not alone." When another member wrote that he had booked a hotel and decided on dosage, then asked if the plan was OK, Stan responded, "Don't stray from the method now."

And he had an answer for Daniel about trying again. Still, the teenager had doubts as he planned his demise.

"I thought that you were supposed to feel happy as you near your bus date," Daniel wrote, shorthand for "catch the bus," a phrase that members use in referring to suicide. "Is a part of me just desperately hanging on?"

In the site's written rules, assisting and encouraging suicide were prohibited, while providing "factual information" and "emotional support" was not. In practice, some members urged others on, whether with gentle reassurance or with more force.

When a woman with bipolar disorder from Brighton, England, explained that she had twice attempted suicide and didn't want to further distress her two sons, another member messaged her, "I'm sorry your sons got traumatized but you know you need to kill yourself."

When an Australian disclosed that he had become suicidal because of persistent behavioral problems, several members taunted him. “Maybe he/she can film it,” wrote one person, joining others in sarcastically calling for popcorn for a viewing. Weeks later, the young man took his life.

No sooner had Daniel expressed his uncertainty than another member commented: “Setting a date has always upset me. I just keep extending it, but I won’t be able to forever. I don’t think you’re doing anything wrong. Hang in there.”

Then, on Oct. 3, the teenager posted a photograph of a bottle of the lethal preservative and announced that he would take it that weekend. But hours later, he posted again. Things had changed: A disagreement with his parents had prompted him to move up his plans.

“I hope you’ll be there :),” he wrote.

Later that night, he thanked other members for “all of the good wishes.” He noted that he was “a little scared” but had specific plans, drawing a flood of messages: 11 “hugs,” four “likes,” three “loves” and two “awws” — the emoji crying a single tear.

At 2:30 a.m., Ms. Dal Canto lay awake and got up to check on Daniel. There was her son, dead in bed.

### **‘They’ll Never Prevail With Censorship’**

In December 2019, two months after Daniel’s death, a coroner in England called for a government inquiry after discovering that members of the site had advised a troubled young woman on ending her life.

German officials had already begun an investigation, worried about potential harm to children.

And Australia’s eSafety Commission, the nation’s regulator for online safety, had been looking into the site for months, after a father reported that his 22-year-old son had poisoned himself with the preservative.

“We were very concerned about having it out there in the open, what that would mean to potentially thousands of other families who had a vulnerable child or a vulnerable person,” Julie Inman Grant, the eSafety commissioner, said in an interview.

Later, a site member in Leeds, England, would ask in his parting words for the forum to be shut down. “Please do your best in closing that website for anyone else,” Joe Nihill, 23, implored in a suicide note.

Serge and Marquis were determined to protect the site — and themselves.

The two men had taken pains to scrub their personal identifying information from the internet and obscure the names of companies hosting the website, making it difficult for authorities and families of the deceased to take action against them.

As Australia began its investigation, the site was moved to a new server, according to a post by Marquis. And when Australian law enforcement officials tried to contact the site, he later wrote, “We ignored their emails and requests for information.”

In March 2020, after the site was removed from online search results in Germany, the company hosting the site threatened to take it down over its “violation of German law.” Once again, the site was moved.

“We have been planning for the worst for years,” Marquis wrote in November 2020, citing daily server backups and the purchase of alternative domains, “and we are confident even if they coordinated all those takedowns at the same time (which is very unlikely), we could be back online within 24 hours.”

The two took other precautions. Serge warned members they would crack down on anyone publicly sharing personal contact information. He also said they would begin closing the accounts of those who had

posted goodbye threads, a step that kept loved ones and law enforcement from gaining access to them later.

“If you’re preparing your departure, please contact a mod so we can help with preparations,” Serge wrote, directing members to moderators.

Concerned about legal liability, Marquis explained, the men were requiring prospective members to tick a box affirming they were 18 or older, though he made clear in a post that the site would not ask for proof.

Links to a suicide hotline and other mental health resources appeared on the site, as did a new public forum focusing on recovery from suicidal thoughts. But Marquis also noted that people who registered only to use the recovery forum “will be denied most likely.”

As several deaths drew scrutiny from news organizations, he claimed that critics wanted “total annihilation of this website,” dismissed coverage as “the usual pro-life BS” and vowed to take “drastic measures” — going to court — to stop efforts to take it down.

“They’ll never prevail with censorship and we will fight every one of their attempts to do so,” Marquis wrote.

His fierce defense drew praise from members. Many said the site was a rare safe space to share their feelings. Some said it had helped them realize they did not want to die.

“People idolized him,” Ms. Davis, the former member, said of Marquis, the more vocal of the two men.

For all the devotion they commanded online, website participants had little idea who Marquis and Serge actually were.

Marquis dropped some hints in his posts. His father had been in the military. He was “about 7-8 years old” on Sept. 11. And he acknowledged his struggles with suicidal thoughts and wrote that he was among those who had been “immensely helped by talking to people on the forum.”

Serge was more private. He didn’t appear to share biographical information and would later remove his posts from the site, essentially erasing his visible connection to it. (The Times viewed screenshots and archived web pages that had captured messages posted by Serge before he deleted them.)

On video chats and other virtual events, neither man showed his face.

But in June 2019, BuzzFeed News reported that in addition to the suicide site, the two men were running the incel websites.

Money didn’t appear to be the motivation. Both men seemed to have found their identity and sense of purpose in the online world of incels, many of whom share a dark outlook known as “black pill.” In 2017, when Reddit had banned an online group of incels for encouraging violence, Serge started an independent site for them, soon joined by Marquis, who had written to him about his interest and skills as a system administrator.

By then, several deadly attacks had been carried out by men expressing grievances common among incels. American authorities would later flag incels as an emerging extremist threat. Radicalization experts warned that some were prone to misogyny, suicide and violence.

On the incel sites that Serge and Marquis run, many members have expressed anger at society; some commend those who commit violence, and fantasize about doing the same. An Ohio man who was a frequent poster on one site was indicted this past July for allegedly plotting to slaughter women. In a podcast interview about incels, Serge said that much of the discussion was “suicide fuel.”



But he and Marquis claimed they were helping those on the sites by allowing them to freely express themselves and face hard truths, a rationale similar to one they have offered about their suicide site.

“If people want to change, if they want self-improvement, basically the whole web is out there to go for that — Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, all the big ones,” Serge said during a virtual panel discussion about incels in January. “But if we are being honest, not everyone has a way out.”

The sites rely on search engines to drive traffic. About half of all visits to the suicide site come that way, according to data from Similarweb.

But when Australian officials asked Google, the dominant business, and Microsoft’s Bing in 2019 to remove the site from their search results, they refused to do so absent a legal requirement.

It was not Google’s role to pass judgment on any sites containing content that was legal, “as objectionable as it might be,” a senior manager told the Australians.

Parents of those who had died would later get a similar answer.

Jess Miers, a legal policy specialist in Google’s Trust and Safety division, responded to a request for help from Kelli Wilson, whose 18-year-old son hanged himself in Texas last year after finding instructions on the site. Ms. Miers told her in a private written exchange that she had spoken with someone running the site — who was using one of Serge’s known aliases — and found him “unhinged.”

In tweets, Ms. Miers acknowledged that the site had moderation problems and that content encouraging suicide slipped through. But she also said that the website and Google were shielded by the First Amendment. (Ms. Miers said in a recent interview that she hadn’t been speaking on behalf of Google.)

Asked about the website, a Google spokeswoman, Lara Levin, said, “This is a deeply painful and challenging issue.”

In a written statement, she said Google tried to help protect vulnerable users, including ensuring that suicide hotlines are visible. But, she said, “we balance these safeguards with our commitment to give people open access to information.”

As for Bing, a Microsoft spokesperson said the company was continually working “to help keep users safe.”

### **‘Look, Here’s the Crimes Code’**

Jackie Bieber went to the district attorney’s office in York County, Pa., in July 2019, pleading with officials to investigate the death of her daughter, Shawn Shatto, two months earlier.

In most states, including Pennsylvania, assisting suicide is a crime. Ms. Bieber shared with prosecutors some exchanges on the suicide site that she thought showed just that activity.

When Ms. Shatto, who suffered from severe social anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions, posted that she wanted to die because she hated her Amazon warehouse job, members offered affirmation.

When she worried that she had screwed up her suicide plans, others assured her she was on track. And when she shared after taking the preservative that she was “terrified,” several wished her success and “safe travels.”

Ms. Bieber, in an interview, recalled identifying the relevant section of the Pennsylvania statute and telling the officials, “‘Look, here’s the Crimes Code.’”

While federal law protects the site operators from being held liable for most content posted by users, the members could be vulnerable to criminal charges.

William Haider, a retired detective in St. Paul, Minn., helped investigate a man convicted in 2011 for assisting in the suicide of someone he had met on a previous suicide website and sent instructions on hanging. “I’m convinced that there are smart people out there wearing a badge that could handle this type of internet crime,” Mr. Haider said in an interview.

But the definition of a crime depends on the jurisdiction. State suicide laws vary. Some specify that assistance must be physical. Only a handful criminalize encouragement.

And the laws haven’t always withstood court scrutiny. In the Minnesota case, the state Supreme Court found that the law was overly broad: While it affirmed that assisting suicide by offering instructions was a crime, the court ruled that prohibiting the encouragement of suicide was an infringement on free speech.

What’s more, police forces and prosecutors are often unaware of the state laws, The Times found. And because suicide is no longer considered a crime, as it was for centuries, they see little reason to investigate it.

“Law enforcement is reflecting societal attitudes,” said Guyora Binder, a law professor at the University at Buffalo, who has written about suicide laws. “We typically see suicide as the unfortunate decision of an individual.”

In Pennsylvania, the local police told Ms. Bieber they didn’t have jurisdiction if the site members who had communicated with her daughter lived out of state. The county prosecutor promised to pursue the case, but two years later, there is no sign that he did.

In Long Beach, Miss., a friend of a 35-year-old man who died from the preservative also sought police help. One site member had offered to advise the man on acquiring the poison discreetly; another exchanged private messages as he was ingesting it.

But Detective Brad Gross, who handled the case, said in an interview that without evidence of physical assistance with the suicide, it wouldn’t be considered criminal behavior. To him, online communication “didn’t feel malicious.”

“It would have been different if it was, ‘Hey look, man, I need you to do this, and hold the pillow,’” he said. “As far as any kind of cybercrime,” he added, “we’re far from equipped to deal with any of that.”

Some law enforcement officials outside the United States have also declined to investigate the operators and members of the site, believing the online activity falls outside their jurisdiction.

Officials in several countries consider the forum an American website. Italian investigators said they concluded that because a site administrator — apparently Marquis, using another of his fake names — provided them with a business address in the United States.

Those factors influenced an investigation in Scotland. Roberta Barbos, a Romanian psychology student at the University of Glasgow, was contacted by a man after she posted a message in November 2019 that she was 22, based in Scotland and looking for a male partner to hold her hand through her suicide.

She and her boyfriend had broken up, and she had sunk into a deep depression, writing, “Sometimes loneliness hurts so much that I can barely hold myself together.” In private messages on the suicide site and later on WhatsApp, a fellow member said he could help.

“I’m based in Glasgow, and have a hell of a lot of experience with hanging ... I’d be happy to aid if you want. No pressure, no judgment and at your own pace.”

Ms. Barbos met the man, Craig McNally, at a local cafe. But afterward she cut off communication.

Within weeks, prosecutors in Glasgow contacted her. Mr. McNally had persuaded two other women from the site to meet him, and then had sexually assaulted and tried to hang each of them, court documents say. (Last week, he pleaded guilty to reckless conduct; charges involving the second woman had been dropped after she declined to participate.)

Law enforcement officials, however, were not investigating the site, which a spokeswoman for the Scottish police said was hosted out of its jurisdiction.

Ms. Barbos got pulled deeper into the suicide forum. She was learning more and more about poisoning. And she was getting swept up in private messaging with a member in Bulgaria, who had offered support. “I wish I could’ve felt real affection before doing this,” she told him.

She managed to escape a predator. But she didn’t escape suicide. In February 2020, Ms. Barbos ended her life while messaging with that member on the site.

“It swallowed her,” said her mother, Maria.

### **‘How Is This Site Still Allowed?’**

The Times investigation led to an elegant three-story apartment building in Montevideo, Uruguay, and a modest two-bedroom townhouse in Huntsville, Ala.

The man calling himself Serge is Diego Joaquín Galante; Marquis is Lamarcus Small.

Reporters pieced together their identities and roles with the site from domain registration and financial documents, their online activity, public documents including court records, and interviews with seven people who had interacted with either of them.

The domain and financial records were never intended to become public. They came to light after a domain seller the site operators had used was hacked this fall, resulting in the release of millions of records. In addition, The Times obtained photographs of Mr. Small and Mr. Galante that were a match with Marquis and Serge.

Records show that Mr. Galante, 29, resides in the Montevideo apartment with his family — several siblings, his mother and his father, who is a lawyer. Mr. Small, 28, lives with his mother and brother in the townhouse.

Mr. Small’s family life has been tumultuous. His father, who has served as an Army officer, and his mother divorced. She was accused of attacking her husband in 2010, and then her adult daughter four years later, according to police complaints.

Mr. Small had his own troubles. In 2017, a bank sued him for \$6,578, and wages from his remote work for a Colorado tech company were garnished until that job ended in 2019.

In two recent phone interviews, Mr. Small denied any involvement with the site. He said that he did not know how his credit card number, name, address and phone number had appeared on an invoice for the suicide website domain name. He suggested first that the information might have been stolen, then that his brother, whose name appears on several documents, might have made the purchase.

Mr. Small did not respond to subsequent phone calls, texts, emails and a letter delivered to his townhouse. Despite similar efforts by The Times to contact his brother, he did not respond.

Mr. Galante, when reached by phone, initially said he knew nothing about the suicide website and hung up. Days later, after receiving a letter from The Times, he acknowledged in an email that he had posted on the site as Serge, but he denied that he was a founder or operator of it.

Records show that Marquis described him as a co-founder of the site and often mentioned in posts that the two had conferred on rules and practices. Serge's own posts identified him as an administrator.

In his email to The Times, Mr. Galante defended the site as a positive influence that improved the lives of some members. But, he said, "I am deeply sorry that there are people who decide to end their life." He noted that the suicide wiki page has been taken down. The extensive information about methods remains, however.

Sharon Luft, Matthew's mother, and other parents want more.

"I'm talking to moms that their kids are dying, they're so frustrated," Ms. Luft said in an interview. And friends ask, "'How is this site still allowed?'"

In January, Robert Davis, a senior vice president at Epik, the domain seller that was later hacked, read Ms. Luft's tweet pleading for help.

Concerned, he had several phone conversations with someone he identified as "the site owner." In an email to The Times, Mr. Davis said he had concluded that that person and the site administrators "lacked the empathy, compassion or intent to appropriately utilize the platform for future good." Epik terminated its services for the suicide site, effectively removing it from the internet.

Within days, it was back, with a slightly different domain name.

Some parents had taken their battle to shut down the site to Washington, in phone calls and Zoom meetings with lawmakers. Those efforts also had little effect.

There has been growing bipartisan agreement that a 1996 law governing online activity — Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act — is in need of reform. In most circumstances, the law shields websites from liability for content that users post on their platforms.

The need for more regulation was repeatedly raised during congressional hearings in October, as Democrats and Republicans alike blasted Facebook and Instagram for content about body image and eating disorders that harms teenage girls. But with tech companies resisting sweeping reform, and the two political parties pursuing different agendas, not much has changed.

As the months went by, more members of the suicide site died. A 21-year-old lifeguard outside Vancouver. A 25-year-old online gamer in Portadown, Northern Ireland. A 31-year-old musician in Kansas City, Mo. An 18-year-old high school student in Italy.

And just this fall, a 30-year-old man in Grapevine, Texas. Newly unemployed, going through a breakup and deeply in debt, he found his way to the site, making his first post in late September. Three days later, he was gone.

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*If you are having thoughts of suicide, in the United States call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255 (TALK) or go to [SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources](https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/resources) for a list of additional resources. Go [here](#) for resources outside the United States.*

## Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	12/09 Fla. arrest: school mass shooting plot
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.mynews13.com/fl/orlando/news/2021/12/09/police--embry-riddle-student-arrested--accused-of-planning-mass-shooting">https://www.mynews13.com/fl/orlando/news/2021/12/09/police--embry-riddle-student-arrested--accused-of-planning-mass-shooting</a>

GIST

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — A 19-year-old Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University student was arrested early Thursday after classmates reported to police that he was allegedly planning a mass shooting at the school on the last day before the winter break.

Police announced the arrest Thursday of an Embry-Riddle student accused of planning a mass shooting at the school

Investigators said the student, John Hagins, sold his car so he could purchase a folding rifle and hundreds of rounds of ammunition.

Officers were alerted to a possible situation at about 4:10 a.m. when two of Hagins' classmates reported concerning images he had posted to Snapchat. They pointed to one photo in particular of a gun and bullets that had the caption "finished my school shopping."

The two concerned students contacted campus safety officer, who then called the Daytona Police Department.

Investigators said the social media messages Hagins allegedly sent led them to believe he was planning to shoot up the Embry-Riddle campus.

"By the grace of God, those two students came forward and thwarted that plan," DBPD Chief Jakari Young said. "By the grace of God, they came forward and prevented Embry-Riddle Aeronautical from being the next national media story, with regards to a mass shooting on that campus."

Later in the morning, officers responded to Hagins' residence in Andros Isles apartments, located in the 100 block of Acklins Circle in Daytona Beach, where he was taken into custody.

In his apartment, investigators reported finding the gun, ammunition and Hagins' backpack.

"Detectives are still trying to piece together the exact motive, but we have learned that Hagins was in danger of failing classes at ERAU and was also cited for a traffic infraction while on campus," the Daytona Beach Police Department said in a release.

Young commended the students who contacted authorities with their concerns about Hagins.

"We could have had a tragedy unfold today," he said in a previous release. "Instead, these students reported it to the school and that allowed us to get to work right away and bring Hagins into custody before he could carry out his plans.

"We thank them all for seeing something and saying something."

Students on Embry-Riddle's campus say they are still coming to grips with Hagins' arrest and alleged plan.

"It's been a little crazy because we're a pretty quiet college campus, all things considered," student Cody Wortley said. "So, to have this pop up out of nowhere is definitely wild."

Hagins' neighbor, Alex Htoo, said the 19-year-old didn't strike him as someone potentially violent.

"He didn't seem like a school shooter at all," Htoo said. "He looked kind of stressed, but when I first met him, he was kind of cool, he was chill."

Htoo said Hagins had been acting differently recently, but didn't think it was anything dramatic.

"Within the next two months, I could see him change a little bit," he said. "Seemed like he didn't want to talk anymore."

	<p>Another of Hagins' neighbors, Arianys Morales, said the accusations against him are worrying.</p> <p>"I mean, I just dont want to be living right in front of him right now," she said. "It's a lot to take in."</p> <p>Hagins didn't talk much, so Morales questioned how much she really knew him.</p> <p>"He just seemed quiet," she said. "I mean, you really can't tell that much about someone when they are that quiet."</p> <p>Hagins is facing charges of written threats to injure or kill, terrorism and attempted first-degree homicide.</p> <p>He was being held without bond at the Volusia County Jail pending his first appearance before a judge, which is expected to happen sometime Friday.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Mistrial: ex-Pasco cop in murder case</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.krem.com/article/news/crime/mistrial-murder-case-pasco-police-officer/293-dc3671e2-3886-4b75-b9f5-25177a392577">https://www.krem.com/article/news/crime/mistrial-murder-case-pasco-police-officer/293-dc3671e2-3886-4b75-b9f5-25177a392577</a>
GIST	<p>SPOKANE, Wash. — A judge declared a mistrial in the murder case involving former Pasco police officer Richard Aguirre on Thursday.</p> <p>Richard Aguirre is charged with first-degree murder for the death of a 27-year-old Ruby Doss. Her body was found near the old Playfair Horse tracks in Spokane in 1986. A new trial date is set for March 7, 2022.</p> <p>Aguirre was previously charged with her murder in 2015 but it was dismissed in 2017 due to a lack of evidence. He is being tried again for the murder because Spokane County prosecutors believe they have evidence needed to convict him.</p> <p>Tuesday morning was the last chance for attorneys to convince the jury that Richard Aguirre is either innocent or guilty of murdering Ruby Doss.</p> <p>The state argued, the victim was in the fight of her life. And that she died at the hands of Aguirre.</p> <p>"Was she already dead when he left her or was she in the process of dying?" Spokane County prosecutor Stefanie Collins said. "Whichever is the case, it's the actions of this man that ended her life."</p> <p>But the Aguirre's defense attorney, John Browne said if Aguirre was the killer, his DNA would have been all over the victim. Not just on the condom found at the scene.</p> <p>"You can't be in a fight without leaving DNA on somebody," Browne said. "Purple leg warmers, red leg warmers, blue socks, white socks, underpants--where there was DNA found--was NOT Mr. Aguirre's."</p> <p>The prosecutor acknowledges there was unidentified DNA in the victim's waste band. But suggests an explanation for this.</p> <p>"She reluctantly sold sex for a living," Collins said. "We have no idea when the DNA got onto her waist band. But we do know when that condom was left there. commensurate with the time of her death."</p> <p>Still, the prosecutor maintains Aguirre acted with intent and murdered Doss when he did not get what he wanted. Then, he tried to cover up evidence at the scene.</p> <p>The jury is now deliberating if the evidence convicts Aguirre of this murder.</p> <p>Aguirre is charged with first degree murder. But the judge gave instructions that the jury could decide on a lesser charge--including second degree murder or first-degree manslaughter.</p>

HEADLINE	<b>12/09 School threats charge: 9 Mich. students</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.hollandsentinel.com/story/news/state/2021/12/09/9-muskegon-county-students-face-charges-threats-made-against-schools/6445536001/">https://www.hollandsentinel.com/story/news/state/2021/12/09/9-muskegon-county-students-face-charges-threats-made-against-schools/6445536001/</a>
GIST	<p>MUSKEGON — Nine students in Muskegon County <a href="#">are facing criminal charges</a> in connection to threats made involving local schools.</p> <p>According to the county prosecutor's office, the nine students range in age from 12 to 14. They are from a handful of districts, including Mona Shores, Muskegon, Muskegon Heights, Reeths-Puffer, Oakridge and Whitehall.</p> <p>"The charges against them include disturbing the peace, intentional threats against a school or student, attempted false report or threat of terrorism, and false report or threat of terrorism," the prosecutor's office stated in a release.</p> <p>Juvenile attorney Margaret Allen said even the less-serious charges come with heavy consequences.</p> <p>"If a child makes a threat against a school, say they do it as a joke, that's still a one-year misdemeanor they're going to be charged with," she said. "They're going to have to come here and hang out with us for a review hearing every three months. It's going to be on their record. If the police have to show up, they may have to pay restitution to the police department that your parents have to pay."</p> <p>Five of the teens appeared in court Wednesday and were ordered to home confinement including strict conditions prohibiting the use of social media. The remaining four will appear in court in the coming days. More details about the defendants are not being released for privacy reasons.</p> <p>"I work with the prosecutors all the time and I'm well aware they're going to make an example and charge it as high as they can and take it very seriously, because the time and the money and the emotional expense of even a threat is so huge that they're not going to tolerate it," Allen said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Pioneer Square shooting: man wounded</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/man-wounded-in-pioneer-square-shooting/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/man-wounded-in-pioneer-square-shooting/</a>
GIST	<p>A man was shot in the abdomen near Second Avenue and Cherry Street around 8 a.m. Thursday, according to a Seattle Police Department online blotter post.</p> <p>Police responded after receiving reports that a man was shot and gave him first aid before Seattle Fire Department medics arrived, according to the post. Medics took the injured man to Harborview Medical Center.</p> <p>Fire and police did not immediately provide information about the severity of the man's injuries.</p> <p>The shooting victim did not give police any information regarding the shooting and declined to participate in the investigation, according to the blotter post.</p> <p>Officers found about 10 grams of methamphetamine and reviewed surveillance footage from businesses in the area.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Arrest: Molotov cocktails to SPOG building</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/renton-man-arrested-for-allegedly-bringing-molotov-cocktails-to-seattle-police-building">https://komonews.com/news/local/renton-man-arrested-for-allegedly-bringing-molotov-cocktails-to-seattle-police-building</a>



<b>GIST</b>	<p>SEATTLE - Seattle Police along with the FBI arrested a 34-year-old Renton man Thursday for allegedly bringing 12 Molotov cocktails to the Seattle Police Department union offices on Labor Day 2020.</p> <p>The man is expected to appear in federal court Friday.</p> <p>On that day, police say 22 people were arrested after a large group marched from the International District to the Seattle Police Officer's Guild building on 4th Ave South. The arrests were for arson assault, obstructing and failure to disperse.</p> <p>Police say they found several intact Molotov cocktails during the arrests.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/09 Calif. cops arrest 180; bust violent gang</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/california-cops-arrest-180-in-takedown-of-violent-gang/">https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/california-cops-arrest-180-in-takedown-of-violent-gang/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>SAN BERNARDINO, Calif. (AP) — Authorities on Thursday announced the takedown of a Southern California street gang that included 180 arrests and the seizure of illegal gambling machines, drugs and guns.</p> <p>The investigation into the violent Westside Verdugo gang, which has been based in the San Bernardino area for decades, also helped detectives solve two homicides, authorities said.</p> <p>David Green, police chief in the city of San Bernardino, announced the arrests in a news conference with California Attorney General Rob Bonta and Jason Anderson, the county's district attorney.</p> <p>"Members and associates of this gang have committed violent crimes in San Bernardino with no regard for the people in the community who are directly or indirectly harmed," Bonta said in a statement.</p> <p>The 180 people arrested include 129 convicted felons, 40 people who are on probation and 12 on parole, Green said in an email.</p> <p>Investigators on Wednesday executed 34 search warrants in San Bernardino County, officials said. They arrested 31 people and seized 11 firearms.</p> <p>The probe also targeted the gang's illegal gambling parlors, which allegedly brought in tens of thousands of dollars weekly, authorities said in a statement.</p> <p>Detectives shut down 30 gambling sites — including some linked to five homicides and other violent crimes this year— and seized more than 100 gambling machines and devices, officials said in the statement.</p> <p>Authorities also said they seized 92 handguns and 19 assault weapons, nearly \$300,000 in cash and hundreds of pounds of narcotics.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/09 FBI arrests beer drinker in Jan 6 Capitol riot</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/09/capitol-riot-conover-beer-coors-facebook/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/09/capitol-riot-conover-beer-coors-facebook/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>As Thomas Paul Conover allegedly joined others in the pro-Trump mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, a Coors Light was his drink of choice for the insurrection.</p> <p>After the rioters "took the Capitol," he said, the Texas man posed for photos inside the building, took selfies and recorded videos, all while proudly holding his beer can.</p> <p>"I don't always storm the Capitol of the United States of America, but when I do, I prefer Coors Light," Conover said in one video posted to Facebook, according to authorities.</p>

But bragging on social media about his role in the Jan. 6 riot led to his arrest this week after the Facebook photos and videos got the attention of one follower he didn't anticipate: the FBI.

Conover, 53, was arrested Wednesday and charged on misdemeanor counts of entering a restricted building and disorderly conduct. The resident of Keller, Tex., was released the same day following a court appearance in Fort Worth.

Conover, who reportedly owns a dent repair business, did not immediately respond to a request for comment early Thursday. His attorney's name was not listed in court records.

His arrest is the latest in a long series of [apprehensions](#) of people who were allegedly involved in the Jan. 6 riot and boasted about being at the Capitol on social media. Their use of Facebook, in particular, fueled anger over President Donald Trump's November 2020 election loss to Joe Biden and [helped foment the breach of the Capitol](#) in an attempt to disrupt the certification of Biden's electoral college victory.

In the weeks leading up to the riot, Conover echoed Trump's false claims of a stolen election on social media, authorities say. The defendant, who is known as Paul Conover, decided last December to travel to Washington, prosecutors say, after a friend convinced him that he should help "take our country back."

"Going to Washington, D.C. ... to join the mob," Conover wrote on Facebook, according to a [criminal complaint](#).

When he flew from Dallas to Washington on Jan. 5, he posted to social media that a "storm is coming but that's what Democrats want."

On the day of the riot, Conover posed in multiple photos holding a Coors Light. He is seen double-fisting a beer and a coffee as the mob flooded the steps of the Capitol. In another, he is sitting on the steps of the Capitol with his beer as the building is breached. When he got inside the building, a smiling Conover is giving a thumbs-up and holding his beer in front of the "Declaration of Independence" painting by John Trumbull that hangs in the Capitol Rotunda. The painting shows Gen. George Washington resigning his commission to the Continental Congress.

"Greetings from Washington, D.C.," he wrote on Jan. 6, according to the FBI. "We took the Capital."

Conover spent more than 20 minutes inside the Capitol, authorities say. In one video posted to social media, he announces to his friends, "This is it, boys and girls. This is the Capitol."

"I pray to God that nobody does any damage to the stuff in here, 'cause I'm not down with that," Conover said, according to authorities. "But I'm kind of, kind of proud of the people that stood up and said, 'You know what? Enough.' "

He added, "It's really kind of cool. I'm glad I came."

Conover "engaged in several verbal confrontations with MPD officers before leaving," the complaint says, referring to Washington's Metropolitan Police Department. But he kept taking photos with his Coors Light.

"After leaving the Capitol, Conover continued taking selfies and posing for photos with his empty beer can," Jimmy Beachum III, a special agent with the FBI in Dallas, wrote in the complaint.

About a month later, the FBI said it got its first tip from an informant who claimed to know Conover. The informant in February sent authorities screenshots of Facebook comments made by Conover talking about how he "had a beer" in the Capitol, according to the complaint.

Authorities said they were able to confirm Conover's identity, and that he was at the Capitol on Jan. 6, through phone records, body-camera footage and his Facebook account.

	Conover is the 20th resident of North Texas to be charged in connection with the Capitol riot, according to the <a href="#">Dallas Morning News</a> . The arrest also went against a plea he made earlier this year to friends who saw the images and videos he posted of himself on Jan. 6.
	“Nothing inside I want shared,” he wrote, according to authorities.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Detecting potentially violent students?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/09/stopping-school-mass-shootings-oxford-michigan/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/09/stopping-school-mass-shootings-oxford-michigan/</a>
GIST	<p>A Virginia public school student suggested he might carry out an ethnic cleansing at his school. Officials were alarmed, but they weren’t sure whether he was serious. They convened a team to assess the threat and notified the police, who found an unsecured loaded semiautomatic pistol in a search of his home.</p> <p>An investigation revealed online messages with a friend in another state considering a similar act — acts that police then thwarted, according to Dewey Cornell, a scholar who keeps track of these incidents but does not give out time or location information to protect the confidentiality of the districts and students.</p> <p>One of the stickiest dilemmas that counselors and teachers face is how to know which students are poised to commit a horrid act of violence and which ones just need help, even urgently. Every day, they walk a terrifying tightrope: Removing every student who shows disturbing behaviors would amount to a huge overreaction. Missing just one true killer could be a tragic underreaction.</p> <p>“It boils down to a judgment call,” said Melissa Reeves, former president of the National Association of School Psychologists. “We don’t have a cookbook that says if this situation happens, do this.”</p> <p>Increasingly, school officials rely on sophisticated threat detection systems designed to head off horrific mass shootings like the one last week in Oxford, Mich. When officials encounter concerns, they might look at social media posts, search a student’s locker or desk and examine academic and disciplinary records. Officials might investigate the student’s access to weapons, recent stressful events in the student’s life, evidence of depression or suicidal thoughts, evidence of planning an attack and consistency of a student’s statements and actions.</p> <p>In Oxford, 15-year-old Ethan Crumbley came to the attention of guidance counselors, who sent him back to class. Later that day, he is alleged to have opened fire, killing four students and injuring seven others.</p> <p>Many academics, school officials and law enforcement agencies suggest decisions like this be made by a much larger, multidisciplinary team including administrators, school-based police officers and mental health professionals such as school counselors, psychologists and social workers.</p> <p>“It doesn’t rest on one person’s shoulders, or one or two,” said Michele Gay, whose 7-year-old daughter Josephine was killed in the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. Gay now runs a nonprofit organization that brings threat assessment training to U.S. schools. “We know that it works, we know it saves lives.”</p> <p>The U.S. Secret Service has long wrestled with this problem as it has sought to evaluate people who might attack the president or other protected officials. In 1999, after a mass shooting at Columbine High School outside Denver left 13 people dead, the agency realized its methods could be used to evaluate threats in schools, too, and began sharing its tools with educators. By 2018, the Secret Service’s National Threat Assessment Center had published <a href="#">a 32-page guide</a> that recommended multidisciplinary threat assessment teams, with a set of criteria for intervention. The FBI also sees threat assessment as a valuable tool in trying to prevent mass school shootings.</p> <p>“You can’t catch someone falling from a building if you’re the only one holding the net,” said Katherine Schweit, a former FBI special agent and author of the book, <a href="#">“Stop the Killing: How to End the Mass Shooting Crisis.”</a></p>

After the 2007 [mass shooting](#) at Virginia Tech, in which 32 people were killed, Virginia became the first state to mandate threat assessment teams, taking the approach recommended by the Secret Service. The requirement was imposed first on universities and, in 2013, on K-12 schools. Now at least 11 states require schools to put these teams in place. One study found that by 2017, about half of American secondary schools and more than 40 percent of primary schools used threat assessment teams.

The Oxford Community School District did not respond to a question about whether it uses a threat assessment system.

In Oxford, on Nov. 29, a teacher saw Crumbley searching online for ammunition. The next day, a second teacher found him with a disturbing drawing of a bloody figure, a gun, a bullet and words including “the thoughts won’t stop” and “help me.” Both teachers reported the incidents. Crumbley was sent to the guidance counselor’s office, where he told counselors the art was part of a video game he was designing, the district said.

After his parents resisted sending their son home for the day, counselors ordered them to find counseling for him within 48 hours and said the school would notify child protective services if they didn’t. He was sent back to class, and that afternoon, according to authorities, he launched his attack.

Cornell, an education professor at the University of Virginia, has developed a widely used threat assessment tool and said that case should have been handled by a threat assessment team. He said any counselor concerned enough to mandate counseling would have been concerned enough to bring the case to such a team, if one were in place.

“Without all the facts and context, it is not possible to judge what the Oxford school authorities should or should not have done, but it appears to have been a preventable event, as are most school shootings,” he said.

His system, first developed in 2001, has been subject to six controlled studies to test its effectiveness, he said. It includes a decision tree that asks school officials to interview the student and other witnesses. School officials are to consider questions, such as whether the student communicated an intent to harm others, whether he or she had offered an explanation or apology, whether there is a way to resolve the conflict, whether mental health services are needed and whether law enforcement should be involved.

One challenge for administrators is knowing when students and their parents are telling the truth. Tracy Ogren, a school psychologist with Robbinsdale Area Schools in suburban Minneapolis, which uses Cornell’s system, often asks to see their social media accounts. If they refuse, that “tells us something, too,” she said. In Oxford, the parents did not tell the school that their son had access to a gun, and officials said [they are reviewing social media posts that appear to show Crumbley](#) cradling a Sig Sauer 9mm handgun — the same make of the weapon used in the shooting — in the days leading up to the shooting.

Many experts say students are far more likely than adults to see warning signs early. Teachers are well positioned to spot disturbing ideas and emotions that might surface in class assignments such as artwork or essays, said Robyn Lady, a director of student services with Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, but teens have an inside window to social media posts, where they are candid about thoughts and plans. Lady holds yearly trainings for students on how to detect and report possible threats.

Reeves, who trains school systems nationwide on using threat detection systems, points out that they still don’t always work perfectly.

Things become “fuzzy,” Reeves said, when a student is not targeting a specific person, or when the student does not appear to pose an imminent risk, meaning no evidence suggests that the student is “going to carry out their plans right now,” she said. It’s not always clear what to do. She said it can also be hard to quickly discern whether someone is lying while gathering information to assess the seriousness of a threat, particularly under pressure. She said the best approach is to gather as much information as possible from as many sources as possible, beyond children and their parents.

“Sometimes we need to interview other students, and we do that confidentially,” Reeves said. “Sometimes the kids will know if there is a gun in the house, for example, because ‘I’ve been there and I’ve seen it’ or ‘So-and-so told me they just got one.’ ”

Another problem comes when schools are overly deferential with parents, said Kevin Ozar, a middle school American history and English language arts teacher at Farmington STEAM Academy outside Detroit. He suspects that’s partly due to fears that parents will pull their children from the district, which means the district loses thousands of dollars in state funding.

“I’ve seen sometimes districts get nervous upsetting the parents who they view as clients,” Ozar said.

He pointed to another challenge involving race and discipline. Schools have historically delivered tougher discipline to students of color than White students for the same infractions. Now, many districts are trying to correct the problem by holding off on disciplinary measures. Ozar said this sometimes leads to bad outcomes.

“I had a parent crying literal tears that they wish we would discipline their child more, but our building and district didn’t feel we could because of the demographics they fit into on paper,” he said. “The discipline is so messy right now.”

Cornell, who is hired by districts to train them on his threat assessment tools, said the system is mostly likely to identify cases in which a student is being bullied or harassed and needs professional attention. The program helps to avoid overreactions, he said, and replaces discipline with help.

In other cases, he said, there are warning signs about violence, but it’s hard to know if a violent act actually would have occurred. Once in a while, though, he hears of a case in which the system appears to have stopped a true tragedy.

A few years ago, Cornell said, a high school student in Virginia who had been bullied and was in conflict with teachers, made a threat to carry out a school shooting. It was deemed serious by the threat assessment team, and he was temporarily removed from the school.

When he returned, he was required to check in with a school official daily. After the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., where 17 people were killed, the boy thanked his school psychologist for the help he has received.

“That could have been me,” he said.

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HEADLINE	12/10 UK court opens Assange extradition to US
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cbsnews.com/news/julian-assange-us-wins-appeal-uk-court-wikileaks-founder-extradition-spying-charges/">https://www.cbsnews.com/news/julian-assange-us-wins-appeal-uk-court-wikileaks-founder-extradition-spying-charges/</a>
GIST	<p><i>London</i> — A British appellate court opened the door Friday for <a href="#">Julian Assange</a> to be extradited to the United States by overturning a lower court ruling that found the WikiLeaks founder's mental health was too fragile to withstand the American criminal justice system.</p> <p>The High Court in London ruled that U.S. assurances were enough to guarantee Assange would be treated humanely and directed a lower court judge to send the extradition request to the home secretary for review. The home secretary, who oversees law enforcement in the U.K., will make the final decision on whether to extradite Assange.</p> <p>But Assange's fiance, Stella Moris, said the ruling would be appealed "at the earliest possible moment," according to the Reuters news service.</p>

	<p>A lower court judge earlier this year <a href="#">refused an American request to extradite Assange</a> to face spying charges over WikiLeaks' publication of secret military documents a decade ago. District Judge Vanessa Baraitser denied extradition on health grounds, saying Assange was <a href="#">likely to kill himself</a> if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions.</p> <p>In appealing that decision at the High Court in London, an attorney for the U.S. government denied that Assange's mental health was too fragile to withstand the U.S. judicial system. Lawyer James Lewis said Assange "has no history of serious and enduring mental illness" and doesn't meet the threshold of being so ill that he can't resist harming himself.</p> <p>U.S. authorities have also told British judges that if the judges agree to let Assange be extradited, he could serve any U.S. prison sentence he receives in his native Australia.</p> <p>U.S. prosecutors <a href="#">indicted Assange on 17 espionage charges</a> and one charge of computer misuse over WikiLeaks' publication of thousands of leaked military and diplomatic documents. The charges carry a maximum sentence of 175 years in prison, although Lewis said "the longest sentence ever imposed for this offense is 63 months."</p> <p>The classified military documents concerned the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.</p> <p>Assange, 50, is being held at London's high-security Belmarsh Prison.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Flight diverted: flyer assaults attendant</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cbsnews.com/news/delta-flight-diverted-to-oklahoma-city-after-passenger-allegedly-assaulted-flight-attendant/">https://www.cbsnews.com/news/delta-flight-diverted-to-oklahoma-city-after-passenger-allegedly-assaulted-flight-attendant/</a>
GIST	<p>A Delta Air Lines flight made an unscheduled landing in Oklahoma City Thursday night after a passenger allegedly assaulted a flight attendant and an air marshal, police said. The suspect was taken into custody.</p> <p>The plane took off from Washington, D.C., and was en route to Los Angeles International Airport when it was forced to land in Oklahoma at 9:35 p.m. local time, police confirmed to <a href="#">CBS affiliate KWTU</a>.</p> <p>The air marshal was able to detain the suspect and police helped to remove him from the plane. No other details about the incident, including possible charges for the suspect, were provided.</p> <p>The flight then continued Los Angeles.</p> <p>Delta issued a statement saying it "applauds the quick action and professionalism of the crew and Federal Air Marshals" and apologizes to its customers for the inconvenience.</p> <p>The FBI is investigating the incident.</p> <p>Delta is no stranger to unruly passengers: As of September, it had <a href="#">banned</a> more than 1,600 for refusing to comply with face mask mandates.</p> <p>It's also part of a nationwide trend. Last month, the Federal Aviation Administration <a href="#">said</a> it had received more than 5,300 reports of unruly passengers in 2021.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Puerto Rico mayor arrested; corruption</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/puerto-rico-mayor-official-charged-us-corruption-case-81651651">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/puerto-rico-mayor-official-charged-us-corruption-case-81651651</a>
GIST	SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -- Federal agents arrested the mayor of one of the wealthiest cities in Puerto Rico on corruption charges Thursday, the second such case announced this month.



Guaynabo Mayor Ángel Pérez Otero faces three counts, including bribery and extortion. He is accused of regularly accepting payments of \$5,000 in exchange for awarding contracts to the owner of a construction company.

The indictment alleges that the scheme ran from 2019 to 2021 and accuses the two of meeting in secret places and of using coded text messages.

No one answered the phone at his office on Thursday and it was not immediately clear if Pérez had an attorney. He was sworn in as mayor in August 2017 following a special election after the former mayor, Héctor O'Neill, pleaded guilty to sexual harassment, gender violence and violating an ethics law.

Puerto Rico Gov. Pedro Pierluisi said in a statement that he was disappointed and extremely upset about the arrest. He demanded that Pérez resign immediately as mayor and as president of Puerto Rico's Federation of Mayors.

In early December, federal officials announced that former Cataño Mayor Félix Delgado pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery and receive kickbacks after he was accused of awarding 50 contracts worth nearly \$10 million to an asphalt company.

U.S. Attorney Stephen Muldrow said that Radamés Benítez Cardona, the executive assistant of the mayor of Trujillo Alto, also was arrested on federal charges including bribery and extortion. He said Benítez is accused of receiving a \$200,000 advance payment and more than \$17,000 a month from a solid waste company in exchange for securing a government contract for them.

Benítez pleaded not guilty.

Federal authorities said other investigations are ongoing.

"This is just the beginning," said Joseph González, special agent in charge of Puerto Rico's FBI office. "Our work is not done."

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HEADLINE	12/09 DEA agent jailed 12yrs: conspiring w/cartel
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/dea-agent-12-years-conspiring-colombian-cartel-81661286">https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/dea-agent-12-years-conspiring-colombian-cartel-81661286</a>
GIST	<p>TAMPA, Fla. -- A once-standout U.S. narcotics agent who used his badge to build a lavish lifestyle of expensive cars, parties on yachts and Tiffany jewels was sentenced to more than 12 years in federal prison Thursday for conspiring to launder money with a Colombian cartel.</p> <p>But even as José Irizarry admitted to his crimes, he blamed former colleagues at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration for fostering a culture of corruption that desensitized him to the implications of violating the law.</p> <p>"When my client joined the DEA he was schooled in how to be corrupt, he was schooled in how to break the law," his attorney, María Dominguez, said in court. "In this alternate universe it became easier and less suspect to accept money and gifts" from criminal informants who worked with the U.S. premier narcotics agency.</p> <p>U.S. District Court Judge Charlene Honeywell in handing down her sentence expressed disgust with the DEA for its failings and said other agents corrupted by "the allure of easy money" also needed to be investigated.</p> <p>"This has to stop," the judge said. "You were the one who got caught but it is apparent to this court that there are others."</p> <p>The DEA did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Prosecutors have described Irizarry's crimes as a "shocking breach of the public's trust."</p>



Irizarry's allegations underscore the porous oversight he received during his career, in which he was entrusted with the government's use of front companies, shell bank accounts and couriers to combat international drug trafficking.

They also raise new questions about whether his colleagues in the Miami field office, where Irizarry's criminal activity began, similarly abused the badge in their handling of confidential informants who every year move tens of millions of dollars in dirty money under the DEA's supervision.

Dominguez in court filings revealed that since Irizarry's arrest last year he has met with prosecutors for "endless hours" to provide information on the criminal activities of "fellow law-enforcement agents who initiated him in a life of crime."

Honeywell recently sealed "sensitive" documents filed in the criminal case, saying their disclosure could potentially impede an ongoing criminal investigation, cause targets to flee and hinder cooperation from other witnesses. So far, other than Irizarry's wife, Nathalia Gomez-Irizarry, and a Colombian customs worker, nobody else has been charged in the conspiracy.

The U.S. Justice Department's Inspector General slammed the DEA in a report over the summer for failing to properly oversee what are supposed to be tightly monitored stings of the sort Irizarry worked on. As a result of the rebuke, which came on the heels of a string of scandals involving agents overseas, Anne Milgram, the DEA's new administrator, ordered an outside review of the agency's foreign operations, which is ongoing.

The DEA has been shaken by repeated cases of misconduct in recent years, including agents charged with wire fraud, bribery and selling firearms to drug traffickers. Thursday's hearing came just four months after another longtime DEA agent, Chad Scott, was sentenced to more than 13 years behind bars for stealing money from suspects, falsifying government records and committing perjury.

The DEA hired Irizarry, 47, and allowed him to handle sensitive financial transactions even after he failed a polygraph exam, declared bankruptcy and kept close ties to a suspected money launderer who would go on to become the godfather of the agent's twin daughters with his Colombian wife.

He pleaded guilty last year to 19 federal counts, including bank fraud, admitting he parlayed his expertise in money laundering into a life of luxury that prosecutors said was bankrolled by \$9 million he and his co-conspirators diverted from undercover money laundering investigations.

The spoils included a \$30,000 Tiffany diamond ring for his wife, luxury sports cars and a \$767,000 home in the Caribbean resort city of Cartagena — on top of residences in south Florida and Puerto Rico. Before he resigned in 2018, Irizarry's ostentatious habits and tales of raucous yacht parties had become well known among DEA agents and prosecutors with whom they worked.

To further the scheme, prosecutors said, Irizarry filed false reports and ordered DEA staff to wire money slated for undercover stings to international accounts he and associates controlled. The money should've been carefully tracked by the DEA as part of undercover money laundering investigations, prosecutors said.

Irizarry has claimed the bank accounts in question amounted to a profit-producing "slush fund" for official and personal travel of federal law enforcement, U.S. prosecutors and confidential sources.

Dominguez said Irizarry accepted full responsibility for his actions but that his take of the conspiracy never surpassed \$600,000.

At Thursday's sentencing, Irizarry broke down in tears as he addressed the court, saying the biggest punishment was not being able to explain to his two young daughters why he would be going away for

so long. He said when he became a federal law enforcement agent two decades ago he did so with a sense of great pride.

“Unfortunately, there came a time when I made a decision that went against the person who I was, that damaged my wife and embarrassed my country,” he said. “I should’ve known better and I didn’t. I failed.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/09 Jussie Smollett found guilty in hoax attack</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/jury-reaches-verdict-jussie-smollett-trial/story?id=81661029">https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/jury-reaches-verdict-jussie-smollett-trial/story?id=81661029</a>
GIST	<p>After just 10 hours of deliberation, a Chicago jury has found actor Jussie Smollett guilty on five of six counts for filing a false police report related to the hoax racist attack he suffered at the hands of two men in January 2019.</p> <p>The "Empire" actor alleged he was <a href="#">attacked, doused with an unknown liquid, had a noose placed around his neck and called racist and homophobic slurs</a> by two men late at night on a Chicago street. He has maintained it was not orchestrated by himself.</p> <p>He did not show any reaction as the verdicts were read. He could face up to three years in prison, though he will likely not face nearly so stiff a sentence.</p> <p>"During my closing argument I told the jury that I thought the evidence was overwhelming. ... That verdict was a resounding message by the jury that Mr. Smollett did exactly what we said he did," special prosecutor Dan Webb told reporters after the verdict.</p> <p>Smollett exited the courthouse without taking questions from reporters.</p> <p>Webb called the guilty verdict a "complete vindication" for the Chicago Police Department, with several officers testifying during the trial.</p> <p>Smollett was charged with six counts of felony disorderly conduct for allegedly filing a false police report. He was found guilty of all five counts related to what he told police officers immediately following the attack. The sixth count, of which he was found not guilty, related to further comments he gave to police two weeks after the incident.</p> <p>Smollett's lawyers said they will appeal the verdict. He said Smollett was "disappointed" but remains "100% confident" he will win on appeal.</p> <p>"We remain confident on appeal he will be cleared of all charges," attorney Nenyé Uche told reporters. "This is an inconsistent verdict. .. I don't believe that justice was done today."</p> <p>Uche said he had "never seen a case like this where a person got jail time," but added "he shouldn't because he's innocent."</p> <p>The defense rested its case on Tuesday after a week of testimony, with Smollett taking the stand in his own defense. He alleged Abimbola and Ola Osundairo, the brothers who carried out the assault, were lying when they said during the trial that they were friends of Smollett and had been paid \$3,500 to carry out the attack.</p> <p>Smollett, 39, received widespread support in the wake of the attack and made an emotional appearance at a concert in early February 2019, but then word emerged after authorities spoke to the Osundairo brothers' return from overseas that the attack was allegedly a hoax. Smollett was charged on Feb. 20, 2019, with Chicago Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson saying the attack was orchestrated because he was unhappy with his salary on the Fox hit show.</p>

	<p>The charges were dropped against Smollett in March 2019, but a special prosecutor announced an indictment for the six disorderly conduct charges was handed down in February 2020. Smollett pleaded not guilty.</p> <p>The jury deliberated for about three hours on Wednesday and then began again on Thursday morning. Gloria Rodriguez, lawyer for the Osundario brothers, said the brothers were elated with the verdict and thanked the special prosecutor for taking on the case.</p>
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